

SWORD ART ONLINE 3
PHANTOM BULLET

IT HAS BEEN A YEAR SINCE THE
《《SAO》》 INCIDENT.

ONE DAY, SEIJIROU KIKUOKA OF THE
MINISTRY OF GENERAL AFFAIRS SENDS
KIRITO A WEIRD REQUEST.

THE 《《DEATH GUN》》 INCIDENT THAT
OCCURRED IN THE GUNS AND STEEL
VRMMO 《《GUN GALE ONLINE》》. A
PLAYER WHOSE AVATAR IS SHOT BY THE
BEARER'S BLACK GUN WOULD ALSO
DIE IN REAL LIFE.... KIRITO, BEARING
DOUBTS THAT THE 《《VIRTUAL WORLD》》
WOULD HAVE PHYSICAL EFFECTS ON
THE 《《REAL WORLD》》, DOES NOT
REJECT THIS BONE-CHILLING REQUEST,
AND LOGS ON TO 《《GGO》》.

KIRITO WANDERS AROUND IN THIS
GAME FOREIGN TO HIM, SEEKING HINTS
REGARDING 《《DEATH GUN》》. THE ONE
WHO STRETCHES A HAND TO AID HIM IS
THE SNIPER WHO USES THE RIFLE
《《HECATE II》》, SINON.

A NEW EPISODE BEGINS!



005

ソードアート・オンライン 5
ファントム・バレット

川原 礫

電撃文庫

550

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かわはら れき
川原 礫

ソロ修行の末に何かを悟ったような気がしましたが気のせいでした。一人カラオケとか無理！ 一人焼肉も無理！ ソロプレイヤーの道は険しいです。ていうか寂しいです。誰かカラオケ誘って。

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005



REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

phantom bullet

『--ICE. I AM A MACHINE MADE OUT OF ICE.』

SINON

§

A FEMALE PLAYER OF THE VRMMO OF
GUNS AND STEEL, <<GSO>>.
A SNIPER WIELDING THE LARGE RIFLE <<HECATE II>>.





「I FEEL LIKE I FINALLY UNDERSTAND.
THE REASON WHY I AM HERE
TOGETHER WITH YOU.」

YUUKI
ASUNA



KIRITO'S LOVER.
A FEMALE PLAYER WITH WIDESPREAD FAME
WHO PARTIED WITH KIRITO IN <<SAO>>.

「HUH... I-IS THAT SO?」

KIRIGAYA
KAZUTO



THE BLACK SWORDSMAN WHO ENDED
THE NIGHTMARISH MMO <<SAO>>.
ALSO KNOWN AS 「KIRITO」.



「SO, I HEARD ABOUT YESTERDAY.
APPARENTLY YOU HAD A
SUCCESSFUL VICTORY?」

SHINKAWA
KYOUJI

§ FORMERLY SHINO'S
CLASSMATE. HE URGED
SHINO TO JOIN <<660>>
WHICH HE PLAYS, WHEN
THEY MET IN THE LIBRARY.

「NOT AT ALL, 4 OUT OF THE 6 PEOPLE IN
OUR TEAM WERE DEFEATED. CONSIDERING
THAT THIS IS THE RESULT OF AN AMBUSH,
YOU CAN'T CALL IT A VICTORY.」

ASADA
SHINO

§ A GIRL IN THE 10TH GRADE WHO
LIVES ALONE IN THE CITY.
A PLAYER OF <<660>> ATTEMPTING
TO ESCAPE HER TRAUMA BY
LOGGING IN AND PLAYING.



「...THIS, IS REAL STRENGTH, REAL POWER!
FOOLISH PEOPLE, ENGRAVE THE FEAR OF
THESE NAMES IN YOUR HEARTS! THIS GUN'S
NAME AND MINE: <<DEATH PISTOL>>.....
<<DEATH GUN>>!!」

DEATH
GUN



A MYSTERIOUS AVATAR WHO PKS
(KILLS OTHER PLAYERS) IN <<660>>.
THOSE WHO ARE SHOT BY <<DEATH GUN>> IN
<<660>> ALSO DIE IN THE <<REAL WORLD>>.

GunGale Online

Also known as GGO. In this world ruled by guns and steel, players aim to become the strongest gunman. Because PKing is possible, not only are there enemy monsters, but players who aim at the winning player. For weapons that appear in «GGO», there's a large difference in the usages of live-fire guns and optical guns. The most popular theory is that live-fire guns are effective against players while optical guns are effective against monsters. There are other traits which greatly differ between them, compared to optical guns which all have generated names and postures, live-fire guns are weapons that originally existed in the real world. Therefore, most of the players in «GGO» are gun maniacs.

In addition, «GGO» is the only VRMMO in Japan with professionals. Higher leveled players can earn a large amount of currency online due to «Game Coin to Currency Recompensing System». As long as they keep getting high scores in «GGO», they can earn their living expenses. This is the reason why «GGO» players devote so much passion and time to it.

PGM Hecate II

Length 1380 mm, weight 13.8 kg. Uses 50 caliber (Diameter 12.7*99 mm) ammunition.

In the real world, it belongs to the object sniping category, it's main purpose being to shoot through vehicles and buildings (Due to it's great power, shooting it at people is forbidden). The so-called «Hecate» is the goddess who rules over the underworld in Greek mythology.

In «GGO», «Hecate II» is one of merely 10 «Anti-Equipment Sniper Rifles» that cannot be found in shops, it is also the rarest type of «Excavated Weapon» that cannot be bought in shops. Transaction price is high, currently priced at 20 million credits (Equivalent to 200 thousand yen).



Prologue

"AGI(Agility) being all powerful is just an illusion!"

The man's high tones spread throughout the spacious bar.

"It is true that AGI is an important attribute as it determines firing speed and avoidance rate. These two factors could make you very strong, until now that is."

That speech came from a player in the square holo-panel floating in the center of the dim shop.

It was the net broadcast, «MMO Stream»'s popular corner, «This Week's Winning Group». You could watch it in the real world from a television or a computer, but it was also broadcasted in many VRMMO worlds' inns and bars simultaneously, so most players liked to watch it «inside».

Especially when the guest player was from «This World».

"But AGI is a relic of the past and to the cripples who had been increasing AGI for 8 months, I can only say this— you have my condolences."

This sarcastic speech caused a loud chorus of booing to erupt in the shop, and many bottles and glasses were smashed onto the floor scattering as tiny pieces of polygon before disappearing.

But «he» ignored all the fuss and sat curled up in the sofa at the shop's deepest corner.

With his camouflage cloak's hood pulled down to his eyebrows and his lower face covered by a thick cloth, he coldly surveyed the shop interior.

He hated not only the man on the screen with his nose in the air, but was also displeased with the dumb looks of the players watching the TV. Everyone booing and howling like wolves, but still enjoying the festival-like disturbances.

Why were they so mindless, «he» could not understand. The man in the TV became the strongest in the world only by pure luck, and at the same time became the biggest exploiter.

In front of all the players who paid connection fees, he was a strutting gamer.

Like «him», all the players should envy and hate that guy. If that feeling was ugly, so be it : to hide it by just laughing with a mixture of ugliness, it wasn't funny at all.

«He» was very tense under his cloak, and he breathed out from between tightly clenched teeth. It was not yet time, and pulling the trigger would come just a bit later.

He returned his gaze to the holo-panel, as the camera zoomed-out, the show's host to the speaker's right and another guest sitting to his left came into the frame.

The hostess of the show, a girl dressed in a full body techno-pop style outfit, said sweetly :

"Truly, as a top player in one of the hardest of all the VRMMO games, «Gun Gale Online», what you just told us is a bit extreme."

"No, being interviewed on «MST» is a once in a life time thing and I've said what I wanted to say."

"Well, well, well, You will be aiming to win the «Bullet of Bullets» this time too, right?"

"Of course, if I enter I would want to be the winner."

The man combed his long silvered-blue hair, and faced the camera with an undefeated announcement. The show was once again ravaged by a storm of booing.

MMO Stream wasn't Gun Gale Online's, normally called GGO, internal content, but the host and guests were avatars, not their real bodies. «This Week's Winning Group» went to different VRMMO games each week and invited their top players for the interview show. This week's guests were from GGO's previous monthly battle royal, known as Bullet of Bullets (BoB). It was used to determine the strongest players, and the guests were the winner and runner-up player.

"But, Zekushiido-san."

After hearing the boasting of the winner with long silver hair, the runner-up opened his mouth, unable to bear it any longer.

"BoB isn't a solo encounter. The 2nd time might not be the same result, what is all this talk about winning based on attribute type?"

"No no, this winning result is to show the whole of GGO and as Yamikaze-san is an AGI type, I understand your feelings of denial."

The winner called Zekushiido immediately retorted.

"...Till now, increasing AGI, and shooting high powered weapons at a fast pace was the best style. That also gave an increased evasion bonus, which helped compensate for the low stamina. But MMOs are not like standalone games, and game balances can change over time. Especially with this level up aspect, you can't change your attributes around, so you have to plan beforehand for endgame and use your points wisely. Even if a fighting style is strongest at this level bracket, in the next level that might not be true. You will understand if you think about it, the weapons coming out from now on will need increasing STR and Accuracy to use. Winning by using evasion to avoid damage is a naive belief that won't always last and my fight with Yamikaze-san showed that. Your bullets were blocked by my bullet-resistant armor and lost their power, but my shots hit 70% of the time. To say it clearly, from now on it's time for a STR-VIT style."

Reined in by that storm of words, Yamikaze's face became distorted by chagrin.

"...But, this is the result of the rare gun that barely met your strength requirement which Zekushiido-san had acquired right before the tournament. How much did you pay for it anyways?"

"No way! That was a rare drop I looted through my efforts. For this reason, the most important attribute might really be Luck, hahaha."

While the silver haired man laughed in the holo-panel, «He» stared with resentment, and his right hand moved under his cloak. Looking for the grip at the holster on his waist, he held on to the hard metallic surface. Almost— almost, the time was almost upon him. He looked at the time displayed on the side of his field of vision. Just one minute and twenty seconds more.

The two people sitting at a table beside «him», were chatting while taking drinks from their jugs.

"Blah, saying good conditions. Back then, Zekushiido-san was the one who said AGI type was the strongest."

"Thinking back now, that popular rumor might have been a trap... We were tricked..."

"Does this mean that saying that the STR-VIT setup is now the strongest is also a bluff?"

"Then what did he really do? Increase LUK?"

"You do it."

"No way."

As the two laughed, their words made «him» even angrier. How could anyone laugh like that after finding out they had been tricked, He could not understand.

—But, that foolish laughter would soon freeze in their throats, when they saw the real strength, the real strongest player.

Finally, it was time.

«He» stood up with barely a sound and moved step by step between the tables. No one stayed within «his» eyes.

Foolish people... tremble in fear.

«He» stopped at the center of the bar, directly under the holo-panel. From his waist holster under his cloak, he drew out a rustic handgun.

Like concentrated, crystallized darkness, it gave off a cold, black, metallic shine. Even the grip of the gun was metallic, instead of serrations, and the center was embellished with stars. From the shape alone, it did not look very powerful and looked similar to any other automatic handgun available everywhere.

But that gun had a «Real Strength».

With a click, «He» pulled back the cylinder and loaded a round, and with trembling hands pointed the gun up— at the holo-panel. Aimed at the forehead of the laughing Zekushiido, the strongest player.

«He» remained like that for a while, and the people around finally noticed him and became noisy. Even for the unlimited PK game GGO, attacking in the streets was not possible. Even if it could fire, it wouldn't damage any player or object.

A few people laughed at «His» pointless action but «He» was not affected, and continued to aim the black gun.

In the panel, Zekushiido continued his nasty tirade.

Zekushiido's real body was lying somewhere, with the «AmuSphere» on his head connecting him to MMO Stream's virtual studio. That was, he had no idea that a gun was aimed at his character on the TV screen of a bar, at the shopping center in GGO's world capital «SBC Gurokken».

But «His» mouth opened, and shouted as loud as he could.

"Zekushiido! You fake winner! Now, taste the truth of real power!!"

Surrounded by the stunned silence of players nearby, «He» held up his left hand, with his finger going to his head, chest, left shoulder, then right shoulder making the sign of a cross.

While lowering his left hand, his right hand pulled the trigger.

In the dim bar, the metallic bullet flew in a straight line— and hit the front of the holo-panel, a small light effect flashed.

That was all. On the screen, Zekushiido's mouth kept moving.

At that time, laughter filled the shop. 'Ahaha' 'He did it' and other words were spoken and over the amused chattering, Zekushiido's speech continued.

"...In the end, including selecting stats and skills, it all depends on the player's real life strengths and abilities..."

Suddenly, the voice froze.

The crowd in the bar turned back to the panel.

Zekushiido, with his mouth still wide open, froze with bulging eyes. His hand raised weakly, trying to grasp the center of his chest.

Immediately, his character disappeared, leaving only the polygon chair behind and the host quickly said in panic.

"Oh no, his connection seems to be disconnected but he should be back soon, everyone do not change your channel and stay tune..."

But no one in the shop heard these words as, in the stunned silence, everyone had turned to focus on «Him».

«He» relaxed his aim at the monitor and pulled back his gun holding it horizontally. In this pose, he slowly turned around and looked at the shocked players in the shop.

After one complete revolution, he again held his black gun high in the air and shouted.

"...This is real power, real strength! Foolish people, engrave the fear of these names in your hearts!"

He took a deep breath—

"This gun's name and mine: «Death Pistol»... «Death Gun»!!"

«He» sheathed the gun in his holster and waved his left hand for the menu window.

While pressing the Log Out button, «His» feeling of triumph, was multiplied by his raging hunger for more.

Chapter 1

"Welcome, table for one?"

As the waiter bowed respectfully, I replied that I was looking for someone, and swept my eyes across the vast expanse of the cafe.

From a window seat inside, a loud and unreserved voice immediately called me over.

"Hey Kirito-kun, over here!"

Elegant classical music circulated around the dining area, and the low chattering of pleasant conversation died down within a split-second as I entered, all eyes focused on me with criticism. Dressed in my old leather jacket and patched jeans, about 80% of the store —upper-class women taking a break from shopping— seemed to feel that I was in the wrong place; I felt resentment starting to swell up from deep within towards the person who asked me to come here.

If it were a sweet and attractive girl, I would have been able to put up with it, but unfortunately the hand waving at me belonged to a man in a suit. I didn't bother to conceal my displeasure and sat into the chair roughly with a 'dosun' sound.

A waiter emerged at my side to present me with a cool glass of water and a warm hand towel, along with the menu. As I picked up the elegant wooden and leather cover, a sunny voice expressed itself from across the table.

"It's my treat this time, so order whatever you like."

"I would have even if you didn't say that."

I retorted sharply and scrolled my eyes down the menu; shockingly, their cheapest item «Choux à la Crème»^[1] was already in the 1200 yen range, and I almost ordered a plain coffee by pure reflex. After remembering that this man was a highly paid bureaucrat, and that the cost of such entertainment would be covered as a business expense by hard-earned taxpayer money, I, who had nearly been taken for an idiot, calmly began ordering.

"Aah... I will have the parfait au chocolat... and a mille-feuille... and finally a hazelnut coffee."

Somehow, I had managed to say the entire order without biting my tongue despite having absolutely no idea what I had just ordered. The menu choices added up to three thousand nine hundred yen. I had considered asking for just a hamburger and shake, using the difference to line my pockets with.

"Very well, Sir."

Waiter-shi^[2] eloquently took his leave, and finally taking a breath, I looked up at the man, called Kikuoka Seijirou, as he ate a ginormous pudding stacked over a veritable mountain of fresh cream.

His face resembled your typical serious and strict Japanese language teacher, with his black frame glasses and tacky hair look. Despite not looking the part, he was indeed a Japanese government official. He belonged to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Technology, Second Separated Advanced Network Division, or, as it's called within the ministry, the Virtual Storage Management Sector of the Communication Network's Management Division; the «Virtual Division».

In other words, this man monitored the state of chaos in the new VR world, as an agent of the State... or a potential scapegoat. Normally, I would feel bad if he did get fired from his position, but in reality, I thought it was highly possible.

It is this unfortunate Kikuoka-shi who, having finally inhaled the last of the pudding into his mouth, looked up to reveal an innocent smile with pure bliss plastered over his face.

"Yah, Kirito-kun, sorry for calling you out on such short notice."

"If you feel any remorse then you should not have called me to Ginza in the first place."

"The fresh cream here is the best. Maybe I should get a Cream Puff while we're at it..."

While wiping my hands with the citrus scented towel, I let out a sigh and said:

"...and also, I don't think you have the right to call me 'Kirito'."

"That's so cruel ~~ wasn't I the first person by your side when you woke up a year ago?"

— Unfortunately, that was a fact. Waking up after having escaped that «Death Game», the first person to visit was Kikuoka, the acting home-side agent of the counter-measure team, at my bedside.

Back then, I had used polite and courteous speech, as he had seemed well-meaning and genuinely concerned, but I soon realized that was not his only reason for getting close to me, and I started using a sharp tongued manner of speech. It could have been his intentions to exploit me from the start— but that might just be me over-analyzing things.

I glanced over to Kikuoka, who seemed distressed over the decision of placing yet another order, and opened my mouth after realizing that I should not let myself get caught in his pace.

"News has it that a huge deposit of rare metals was discovered at Sagami Bay, and the related big shots have organized a celebratory Oklahoma mixer dance. Don't be so troubled over just one cream puff."

These words caused Kikuoka to raise his head, blink a few times, and smile.

"Well, no matter the yield gained, because it is unrelated to my department, I do not believe we will benefit from it. I'll just bear with my hunger, for the sake of our economy."

The diplomat snapped the menu shut and I let out yet another sigh.

"Ok then, it is about time you tell me why you called me here. ...I bet it's just to investigate another virtual crime isn't it?"

"Oh, Kirito-kun saying it straight out really makes this easier."

After such a bold statement, Kikuoka took a briefcase from the chair next to him and pulled out a very thin tablet terminal.

—Yes, after all, this man used survivors of Japan's largest net crime, «The Sword Art Online Incident», like me as informants.

Normally, to investigate the origins of a crime, Public Safety would generally pay a fee for information provided by «Collaborators» and «Watchdogs», among other things, making it like a «Business Deal». If that were the case, then calling me out to eat cake like this could be seen as just «Business» with Kikuoka.

I really wanted to think of it that way, but this was the same man who had broken the rules to tell me which hospital Asuna was in, and that was a debt that I still owed him.

Without that information, I would have been delayed in finding Yuuki Asuna in the real world and as such, it may not have been possible to find out the devilish plots of Sugou Nobuyuki and rescue Asuna from his clutches.

As such, for the time being given the circumstances, I did not object to being Kikuoka's «Watchdog» very much. Although quite recently I have stopped using polite and courteous speech and started ordering the more expensive cakes.

Meanwhile, whether or not he was aware of that fact, my benefactor played around with his tablet terminal and said lazily:

"Weeeell, about that, this time it's about the increase in the rate of virtual space crimes, you see..."

"Hmm. Specifically?"

"Let's see... Just this November more than 100 cases of virtual theft, property damage, and etc. were observed and filed. Moreover, there have been 13 cases in which VR game disputes have lead to real world manifestations with one incident leading to death... That one case had been quite a big incident so Kirito-kun must know about it already, someone made a replica western sword and swung it around Shinjuku Station slashing two people to death. Uhyaa, the blade was 1.2 meters long, and weighed 3.5 kg. How did he manage to swing that thing around?"

"It seemed like a hardcore player using drugs and hallucinating... Although looking at this one case alone doesn't help very much when put into a general perspective compared to all the other cases..."

"Indeed, in terms of the overall national crime rate, these barely amount to anything, but concluding from a myopic perspective it may be VRMMO games that breed such social unrest. However, as you had previously mentioned..."

"—VRMMO games do cause people to lower certain boundaries in reality. It is something even I recognize."

At that time, the waiter returned with silent footfalls and placed in front of me two plates of dessert and a cup of coffee.

"Would this be everything Sir?"

After a nod, he placed a bill with a scary figure face down on the edge of the table. I took a sip of the coffee that exuded a nutty aroma and continued our conversation.

"... As PKing is seen in most of these games as just another daily occurrence, it isn't impossible for such an environment to serve as a training ground for real world murders. Especially in this new genre of games, where cutting off a wrist leads to blood spurting out and slicing open a stomach results in internal organs spilling out. Above that, are also hardcore maniacs who would rather commit suicide than log out."

A throat was cleared from a nearby table with an interrupting 'ahem', to reveal two prim and proper women glaring daggers directed at me. I lowered my head, and continued in a quieter voice:

"Given such common daily occurrences, it isn't much of a mystery for some idiot to have brought back that practice into reality. I too, feel the need for some sort of counter-measures to be put into place, although the law would be nearly useless in such a case."

"Useless?"

"Useless."

With a golden spoon, I carefully skimmed off a thin layer of pink cream and cake, cautiously transporting it to my mouth as I thought to myself, that each spoonful was worth 100 yen. While savoring each delicious morsel as it literally melted in my mouth, I continued on our debate of savagery.

"...Not even if you closed off the network. Because the VRMMO networking server is relatively easy to set-up, no matter how much you ban it in Japan, users and traders will just move overseas."

"Hmm..."

Kikuoka's dignified gaze fell onto the table, and after a few seconds of thought, he opened his mouth.

"...Your mille-feuille looks good... may I have a bite?"

"..."

I directed my third sigh, along with my plate, towards Kikuoka. This career dignitary then proceeded to steal with great gusto, approximately 280 yen's worth of my mille-feuille, and stuffed his cheeks.

"But you know, Kirito-kun, I was just thinking... Why PK? Isn't getting along nicely with everyone else more fun than just killing them?"

"...You play ALO too, so you should already have an idea, as long before FullDive, there'd already been MMORPGs that stole from each other. To say the least, because such games do not technically have definitive endings, some form of endgame content has to serve for player's motivation... like seeking and playing for the feeling of superiority over others, I think."

"Oh?"

In the midst of his chewing, Kikuoka raised his eyebrows as if to request a further explanation. Seriously, why did we have to talk about that, deep inside I considered poisoning him, half for the sake of revenge as I continued:

"...It's not just limited to the game. Wanting to be recognized, wanting to climb even higher than others, isn't that the basic structure of our society? Even you should understand as those in the same department as you, there are government officials who are envious of others with a better university degree or have faster promotions due to connections; but on the other hand, they look down at the non-government officials with a smug sense of superiority. Finally those with both inferiority and superiority in balance can eat cake with peaceful faces, isn't it?"

Kikuoka swallowed the mille-feuille, and smiled gingerly.

"You are quite frank with your spite aren't you? So what about Kirito-kun? How do you take the balance?"

"..."

Of course, despite having an inferiority complex as high as a mountain, I have no intention of telling this guy. With an ignorant face, I fired back:

"...Well, at least I'm together with my girlfriend."

"I see, I am jealous to death over that one point, Kirito-kun. The next time we're in ALO, wouldn't you introduce me to some girls? Take the Sylph Lord for example, she is just my type."

"I'll tell you in advance, the moment you say 'I'm actually a high ranking bureaucrat', you'll get decapitated."

"If it's by her, then I wouldn't mind being killed once. —So?"

"So, about this superiority complex, it's surprisingly hard to fulfill in the real world. It's not something you can get unless you work really hard. You'll have to study hard to get better grades, to get better at sports, become cooler, or more attractive... All of which require a lot of time and energy and there is no concrete guarantee of payoff, above that the requirements are near impossible to achieve anyway."

"I see. After all, I did study to death for my exams, and still did not get into Toudai^[3]."

For some reason, having seen Kikuoka smile so happily while speaking about the subject, I suppressed the desire to make a smart remark and quickly continued talking.

"Then, MMORPG to the rescue. Here, time sacrificed doesn't pass in vain like in reality and your character will become stronger as you find rare items, learn more skills, and have higher stats. Of course you'd still have to work hard, but that's because it's still a game. Rather than studying or training your muscles, this is a lot more fun. Equipping expensive gear to show off your high level while walking down the avenues of a main street, you will definitely attract a lot of envious attention from those weaker than you... virtually, that is. If you go to the hunting grounds, you can defeat monsters with overwhelming power, or save a party in a pinch. Be thanked, be respected—"

"Virtually?"

"...Of course, that's only one aspect of it and MMO games also do have many other elements to them. But, network games with social networking as the main theme have been around for a long time, and none has been more successful than MMORPG."

"...I see, that kind games are hard to satisfy the need to feel superior?"

"Yes. —Then VRMMO games came out. In these games, you can walk down the street yourself instead of through an avatar character. Where previously you would have had to settle for fantasizing about it through your computer screen, you now actually feel the gazes fixed upon you."

"Hmn. That is true I guess, because when you walk side by side with Asuna-chan in Yg-city, everyone stares."

"...You say such spiteful things so bluntly. In any case, in VRMMO games, so long as you take the time to do it, anyone can achieve a sense of superiority. Compared to how well you study, how good you are at soccer or how much money you have, is much simpler, much more primitive, and appeals directly to human instinct.

"...In other words...?"

"In other words, it's «Strength», physical, arduous strength. With your own hands, the power to destroy your opponent. In a way, it's like being on drugs."

"...«Strength» ...Or the greatest «Power», huh."

Kikuoka murmured with some kind of nostalgia.

"...Boys will, no matter who, always seek strength at one point or another... doing things such as reading fighting-based manga and wanting to train the same way they do. But, usually most of them will immediately recognize the futility of doing so, and start to pursue a more realistic goal... —I see, then are VRMMO's not another chance to pursue such goals, I wonder."

I nodded, and as I rarely speak so much, soothed my dry throat with some coffee before speaking.

"Aah. Some games from the fighting genre also seem to merge into reality, where alliances and schools of martial arts are formed."

"Oh? Which means?"

"In other words... What characters learn in-game could very well lead them to become experts in things like This-and-That-Styled-Karate or Here-and-There-Styled-Kenpou. That in turn could reproduce some of the stereo-typified scenes of Shinjuku and Shibuya, leading to some outlaw bros taking out enemy characters, the Tekken system of justice.

...Following that, obviously I can't teach you to understand their hearts. People who live in this kind of games might want to try out the skills they learn in VRMMOs in the real world... or might already have, that possibility does not exist, is unfortunately not something I am able to say— such are my sentiments."

"I see... It's an invasion of the VRMMO concept of «strength» into reality, huh. Hey, Kirito-kun."

Kikuoka, his face once again turning serious, looked at me.

"That, are we only talking about psychological issues here?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Beside their psychological resistance to committing acts of violence being lowered, and also being able to gather the knowledge and skill required to commit violence... In reality, their physical attributes somehow accommodating these changes... that kind of thing doesn't occur, right?"

This time, it was my turn to think and reflect.

"...That is, using the example from before, that the physical strength required to swing around a 3.5 kg sword in Shinjuku, was developed by the man in the game-world... you mean?"

"Yes, that."

"Hmm... As for the FullDive system affecting the human nervous system, it seems that research has just begun. But in reality, lying down for long periods of time would certainly result in diminished overall strength, although such brute strength surfacing just for an instant could be due to the rush of adrenaline in the heat of the moment... —But that's more your field than mine, right?"

"A long time ago, I went to listen to what a professor had to say about neurophysiology, and it was like Greek to me... We may have gotten off track a lot, but we've reached today's objective. Please take a look at this."

Kikuoka played with his tablet, and handed it to me.

I accepted it, and on the LCD screen, I saw the mug-shot of a man I did not recognize, with his home and other profile next to it. He had extensively long hair, silver rimmed glasses and quantity of neck and cheek fat.

"...Who's this?"

Accepting the terminal back from me, Kikuoka moved his fingers around.

"Riight, last month... on the 14th of November. At an apartment located in Nakano Ward, Tokyo, the landlord noticed an unpleasant smell while cleaning up around the area. He tried to reach the resident through the

inter-phone, but there was no response and there was no answer on the regular phone either. But as the room's lights were still on he released the electronic lock out of curiosity, and found this man... Shigemura Tamotsu, age 26, dead. It seems he had died five and a half days ago. There were no signs of the room being ravaged, and the body was lying on the bed wearing on his head..."

"An AmuSphere, I'm guessing."

I had one of those in my room too, two overlapping golden rings that formed a piece of head gear, the FullDive machine popped up in my mind as I said it, then Kikuoka lightly nodded.

"That's right. —Immediately we contacted his family members, and ordered a post-mortem autopsy to investigate the mysterious death. Cause of death: acute heart failure."

"Heart failure? The one where a heart suddenly stops beating right? Why did it happen?"

"We don't know."

"..."

"As a long time had passed since the time of death and the probability of it being a crime is low, we didn't do a detailed autopsy. But it seems like he had not eaten for 2 days after having logged in continuously."

I frowned once again.

To be honest, such cases aren't all that rare. Why? Because although having eaten nothing in reality, having consumed something while inside a VRMMO means that you still feel full, and the feeling lasts for a few hours. Addicts, or those so-called hard-core gamers, tend to consider time outside gaming as time wasted, and cases where people don't eat for 1 or 2 days really aren't that rare.

However, if such routines are consistent, it'd be impossible not to have negative repercussions on the body. A malnourished victim living alone having an attack... wasn't a very rare case at all.

Closing my eyes for a moment and after praying for Shigemura-shi to find happiness in the next world, I opened my mouth.

"...while this is tragic, but..."

"Indeed it's depressing, but it is common these days. Because such an incident won't appear on the news, and the family members won't say much as they want to conceal the fact of dying from this way due to a game, we can't seem to conduct any further investigations. In a way, such a death can also be seen as an invasion of VRMMOs, but... "

"...You wouldn't normally call me out just to hear a surface theory right? What's up with this case?"

At my question, Kikuoka glanced at his terminal, and answered.

"This Shigemura-kun installed only one game on his AmuSphere. «Gun Gale Online»... heard about it?"

"That's... obviously a given. Due to the fact that it's the only VRMMO game in Japan with «Pro» playing; I haven't played it myself, though."

"It seems that in Gun Gale Online... Abbreviated GGO, he was ranked as the top player. That was decided in an event during October to find the strongest. His character's name was «Zekushiido»."

"...Then, did he die while logged into GGO?"

"Actually, no, he didn't. His avatar, «Zekushiido», was being featured on «MMO Stream», a channel hosted by one of the net stations."

"Aah... You mean M-ST's «This Week's Winning Group»? That reminds me, I remember hearing that one of their guests lost connection during a show and it stopped in the middle..."

"Yeah, probably that one. He suffered heart failure while on the show. Their log recorded everything to the exact second. Then, this is unconfirmed information... Around the time of the heart failure, something weird happened in GGO, according to a user's blog."

"Weird?"

"MMO Stream also broadcast in GGO right?"

"Aah. They usually air in pubs."

"It happened in a pub that was airing the show, off a street in the capital city «SBC Gurokken» of the GGO world. So, the problem is that around that time, one of the players happened to do something really strange."

"..."

"Anyway, toward a televised image of Zekushiido-shi, «He» discharged a gun while screaming about judgment and death. Having seen that, one of the players who had coincidentally been recording the event uploaded it onto a video site. The uploaded clip also included a counter in JST^[4] ... And... The gun was fired on the 9th of November, at 11:30 PM, 02 seconds. Shigemura-kun's sudden disappearance from the show, at 11:30 PM, 15 seconds."

"...Just a coincidence right."

I said, as I moved my second plate in front of me.

Taking a spoon-full of some tea-colored cylindrical thing, I brought it to my mouth. At once, its coldness surprised me. If it were a type of cake, it'd be an ice-cream cake, I thought. With sweetness that was barely contained, the densely packed chocolate essence began to unfurl, overpowering the bitter taste of the conversation that Kikuoka had started.

I polished off a third into my stomach and continued from where I had left off.

"Becoming the top ranked player of GGO would naturally cause others to hate him and envy him beyond the degree found in other VRMMOs. To shoot the actual person might require a lot of bravery, but it's not very strange for the TV image to have been shot at."

"Yes, however, there was another incident."

"...What?"

My spoon-hand froze, and I looked up into Kikuoka's unchanging poker face.

"This time, it happened just about 10 days ago, on the 28th of November. A dead body was found in the unit of a 2-story apartment building in Ômiya Ward, Saitama City, Saitama prefecture. A newspaper seller thought he was being ignored as the unit's lights were still on, despite there being no answer, he tried the door knob and it wasn't locked. Looking inside, a man was found lying on his futon wearing an AmuSphere, with a similar odor..."

Ehem! A deliberately cleared throat put our conversation on hold; we looked at the same two women from before, at a table near ours, as they glared condemningly and gave us the evil eye. But, in a surprisingly bold move by Kikuoka, he nodded at them and continued our conversation.

"...Well, let's skip the details of the postmortem autopsy. This time, it was also confirmed to be death by heart failure. His name... let's skip that too. Male, 31 years old. He was also a very strong GGO player and his character's name... was «Usujio Tarako^[5]»? Is this the right name?"

», so they're probably related. Was this Tarako-shi also on a TV program?"

"No, this time it was an in-game incident. From the AmuSphere's log, his connection was cut off about 3 days before the body was found, on the 25th of November, at 10:00:04 PM, Estimated time of death is also thought to be around that period. At that time, he was at Gurokken's town square attending a Squadron —a guild, apparently— meeting. He'd jumped onto the stage to voice an opinion, and a player who crashed the meeting shot him with a gun. Although city streets are areas where all and any damage received would get instantly voided, he was angered by the gunman's assault and went after him, then suddenly disappeared. This information was also taken from a net forum thread, so the authenticity leaves much to be desired, but..."

"The gunman, is it the same player from the «Zekushiido» incident?"

"You can think of it that way. After all, words like 'justice' and 'strength' were also spoken by a player with the same character name as from the previous case."

"...What kind of...?"

Kikuoka checked his tablet, and frowned.

"«Death Pistol»... That and «Death Gun»"

"A Death... Gun..."

—In other words, «Death Gun»?

I placed my spoon on the now empty plate, as I repeated that name to myself over and over in my thoughts. Such a character name, no matter how much it was intended as a joke, really did give off a certain impression of the character. Death Gun, the impression that name evoked was of black metallic coldness.

"...You're sure that Zekushiido and Usujio Tarako both died of heart failure, right?"

"If I said yes?"

"And... No brain damage?"

Upon hearing that, Kikuoka caught my drift and grinned.

"That bothered me too. And I confronted the forensics team about it, but they couldn't find any abnormalities like cerebral hemorrhages or cerebral arterial occlusions."

"..."

"Also, with Nerve Gear... Ah, are you fine, discussing this?"

"I'm fine."

"...With Nerve Gear, when it kills a user, its signal sensors turn into a high powered microwave which destroys a part of the brain, but AmuSpheres are not made to emit such high powered electromagnetic waves. 'Such a machine can only transmit auditory and visual types to the 5 senses with very low and mild signals', is what the developers had claimed."

"So you have already talked to the makers... you did your homework for this meeting, huh, Kikuoka-san? Is it an accident that you manage to do your job just by looking through passing rumors?"

As I stared through the lens of his glasses at his narrowed eyes, Kikuoka erased that expression in a second, and immediately, his lips widened into a smile.

"I get flown everywhere; so actually, I'm quite free on a daily basis."

"Then, next time why don't you help the front-line clearers of Aincrad. Sir Eugene praised you for being a good mage, you know."

Actually, I had never once thought this man to be the joke of an officer that his appearance and demeanor portrayed. He created a character in ALO not because he had an interest in the game, but most likely for the sake of easily collecting intelligence on the VR world. Although the business card I had previously received placed him under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Technology, there was definitely something suspicious going on here. That his real unit was a part of the Department of National Security was something that I had already considered.

But leaving that aside, it seemed that the «Virtual Division» during the «SAO Incident Victims Rescue Countermeasure Team» period, had only managed to accommodate all the players into hospitals due to his efforts.

Therefore, with that and the favor regarding Asuna's location, I am dealing with him at a ratio of 60% gratitude to 40% suspicion.

So whether he knew my inner thoughts or not, Kikuoka just scratched the back of his head and gave an embarrassed smile.

"You're too kind; I can memorize the spell words, but am not good at chanting them. I have been really bad at tongue twisters since a long time ago. ...Anyway, well, regarding this case, I think the chances are over 90% that it is either a coincidence or a hoax. That's why, we need to disprove it. —Kirito-kun, you think it's possible? Is it possible for a person shot in-game, to consequently suffer an episode of heart failure in reality?"

Kikuoka's proposal conjured up an image in my head, causing me to frown.

Dressed completely in black... A faceless gunman peered into the void and pulled the trigger. A black phantasm bullet was shot forth piercing through the virtual wall; the packet invaded the network world. From router to router, server to server, making various right-angled turns, the bullet charged onward. Eventually, it would reach a certain apartment unit, materialize outside the LAN connector mounted on the wall, and hit a man's heart while he was laying down...

Shaking my head to clear that disturbing image, I raised a finger.

"I do think it's impossible, but... Just assuming, that... «Death Gun» is our gunman, and he somehow managed to send some signals to the AmuSpheres of «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako»..."

"Oh, let's start from there. Is it even possible to do something like that?"

"Yea... If what was sent was not some deadly mysterious force, but normal sense signals... You still remember the «Imaginator Virus» that caused a commotion from a while back?"

"Aah, that surprise mail incident, right?"

Imaginator, that was a piece of software developed by someone for the AmuSphere. That piece of software generated a virtual space for diving, where you face the camera and whisper a message, and then compress it into a mail format. The receiver can then replay the file, which would reproduce the sender's virtual body and the spoken message, that kind of thing. Since you could convey videos, audios and even sense of touch, it became very popular.

Eventually though, a security loophole was found, and there was a virus infected mail that would accompany the original message, which caused a major disturbance. If you tried to dive with that mail in your inbox, it would force open a preview, and before your eyes in surround sound and color, something shocking —usually erotic or gross, one or the other— would start to play.

Of course, eventually a patch file was uploaded, and the incident was solved, but...

"—Most AmuSphere users should have installed «Imagine» by now. But if there were unknown security holes, and the victim's e-mail or IP address were known..."

"...I see, setup a sending timer ahead, then send the signal at the same time as the gun shot— something like that is possible."

Kikuoka weaved his fingers together, and nodded as he rested his chin on top of them.

"Then that part is cleared. —But it wasn't a cursed fatal bullet that was sent. Ultimately it's normal senses stimulation."

"In other words, enough feeling to stop a heart... Probably things like taste, smell... light and sound...Right? Let's talk about them one by one. First sense of touch, feeling on the skin."

I paused with the speech, and pressed my right thumb into my left palm. Earlier, what I had eaten was not chocolate cake as I had thought, but ice cream, I remembered I was shocked then.

"...What would happen, if you sent the full body to the limits of its cold tolerance? Like if you jumped into a bath full of ice water. Could that stop a heart?"

"Aah... Jumping into ice water could stop the heart, as the difference in temperatures would cause shock to the body, and the body's blood vessels would contract, which would over-stress the heart... It couldn't be that."

"—Then, I guess we can't go down this line. Even if the brain feels the cold, the capillaries of the other body parts won't feel a thing..."

"Then, how about this?"

This time, Kikuoka rubbed his hands together while speaking. It probably was a mistake on my part, but Kikuoka seemed to smile heartlessly.

"Super small insects... Smaller than a beetle, somewhere in the long worms category. Something like a caterpillar or centipede, the feeling of being dropped into a hole filled with those. Of course, it'd be accompanied by video. Urgh, just imagining it gives me goose bumps. "

"..."

With no other alternative, I too tried to imagine it.

While taking a leisurely stroll through a field, the earth suddenly collapses beneath my feet, and I plummet through the earth collapsing into a deep pit. A thin, long, creature slithers nearby, circling my body until it crawls up near my wrist towards my collar, and finally makes its way underneath my clothes...

"...Seriously, I've got goose bumps."

I rubbed my hands together, and shook my head.

"But that degree of a shock, even that «Imagine Virus» could do it. All of a sudden a huge caterpillar or a Nomura's jellyfish falls from above your head. But there weren't any fellows who had their hearts stopped... I think. In the first place, the moment you enter a VRMMO, you're unconsciously prepared for unexpected situations. In some fields, a boss monster can suddenly pop out right beside you and if your heart stopped every time, it wouldn't make for much of a game."

"You have a point."

Kikuoka shrugged, picking up the cup and turning it slightly.

"...So, the next sense to be considered should be taste and smell. But how would that work? If someone suddenly tasted or smelled something disturbing... like the taste of kiviak ^[7] reproduced. That person might vomit. That kind of vomiting reaction might affect the body as well..."

"If that's the case, it's not exactly stopping the heart. But could the vomit material stop breathing? Also, what is a kiviak anyway?"

At that moment, seeing the excitement flashing in Kikuoka's eyes, I regretted asking. This man liked to talk about bad tasting things. Though

obviously an elite, he did not have a girlfriend and this could be considered one of the reasons responsible.

"Oh, you don't know? Kiviak is an Eskimo food. At the beginning of summer season, they will catch small migrating sea birds called Appaliarsuk and stuff them into a seal skin bag with the meat taken out. Then the entire bundle is placed in a cold, dark corner for a few months, until the seal fat permeates the birds and they ferment nicely, or more specifically, become rotten. At that time, they take out the birds like melted chocolate, the internal organs taste like that kind of food. The stink is supposed to be worse than Surströmming^[8], but once you acquire the taste, you just can't have enough..."

Clank! I glanced toward that loud sound and saw the ladies near us covering their mouths in disgust and they were leaving their table with due haste. Once again, I sighed deeply, and then interrupted Kikuoka.

"If you have a chance to visit Greenland, then please try it. Also, you don't have to explain that Surs whatever."

"Oh, okay."

"Don't be regretful. —And no matter what, eating disgusting things won't stop the heart. Let's go for the next... Video huh..."

The rich aroma of coffee erased Kikuoka's foul words and I continued speaking.

"Similar to the insect example from before, just a significant video probably can't stop a heart no matter how fearsome or cruel the images are. Basically, it might cause great trauma, I think, but it would be really difficult to investigate."

"Hmm— You said significant right?"

"Yeah. ...for example, and this was long before I was born so I don't exactly know the details, but many children who watched a certain TV anime collapsed at the same time all over the country with symptoms of epilepsy."

"—That event. I was in kindergarten then and I saw it in real time."

Kikuoka said with a nostalgic feeling.

"I think it was the continuous flashing of red and blue lights in the show that caused it."

"It is probably that. If the same intense flashing lights video was sent, people would normally shut their eyes in reaction. That isn't possible if it was sent directly into the brain and some kind of shock happening is not entirely inconceivable."

"Yes, indeed so."

Kikuoka nodded his head, but then shook his head and continued.

"—But then, that question was debated on when AmuSphere was developed. The result was a safety device in the form of a limiter setting. Video images with more than a certain level of vibration amplitude are not shown by the AmuSphere."

"—Hey you."

This time I shot Kikuoka a 100% suspicious look and said.

"It seems you have already investigated all the possibilities, right? If you had already picked the brains of the ministry elites, then you don't need me now to debate about this. What are you really trying to do?"

"No no, that's not it. Kirito-kun's way of thinking is really stimulating, it was a huge reference and I also like speaking with you."

"But I do not like to speak with you, and as for sound perception, that should also have a limiter. Therefore, in conclusion— influencing the human heart inside a game is impossible. «Death Gun»-shi's shootings and the two men's heart attack are completely coincidental. Good bye, I'm going back and thank you for your hospitality."

I have a hunch that if this topic continues, it will certainly not result in anything pleasant. So I hurriedly said my thanks and stood up.

However, Kikuoka frantically called to stop me.

"Waaaa- wait, wait. From here on is the real main topic. You can order another cake; just stay with me a little longer please."

"..."

"Well, I am relieved that Kirito-kun reached that conclusion. I also thought the same thing that these two deaths were not from being shot from inside a game. Saying this however, I do need a favor—"

Here it comes, I frowned while thinking, and continued to listen.

"Can you log into Gun Gale Online, and contact this «Death Gun» guy?"

He then smiled at me.

To this bureaucrat's innocent smiling face, I used my coldest voice.

"Contact him? Why not just be open about it, Kikuoka-san. Go get shot, you mean, by this «Death Gun»."

"No, well, ahahaha."

"No way! If something actually happens, what should I do? You go get shot and have your heart stopped!"

I stood up once again but Kikuoka grabbed onto my sleeve.

"Earlier, we both agreed that this can't be real. Also, this «Death Gun»-shi has a very strict requirement for his targets."

"...Requirement?"

I asked him and I could not help but sit down again.

"Yes. The two people, «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako», which «Death Gun» shot, were both famous top players. That is, if they are not strong, they won't be shot, probably. For me, even years won't get me that strong. However, for you who even Kayaba-shi acknowledged as the strongest..."

"It's impossible for me too! GGO is not that easy of a game and «Pros» are in it."

"That er, what does «Pro» mean? You said it earlier as well."

Recognizing that I am being sucked into Kikuoka's pace after all, I explained reluctantly.

"...It literally means people who make their income from the game. Gun Gale Online is the only game in all of VRMMO that has a «game coin to real money conversion system»."

"...Really?"

Even for someone like agent Kikuoka, he still didn't know all of the game details as his question seemed to actually be genuine this time.

"That is, simply, the money earned inside the game can be converted into real money to be returned to you. In truth, it's not the Japanese yen, but electronic currency. But because there's nothing that couldn't be bought with it now it's the same thing essentially."

"...But can a VRMMO stay in business by doing that? Company operators and staff are not exactly volunteers right?"

"Of course, it doesn't mean that all the players can make money. It's the same with pachinko machines and horse races. The monthly fee, if I remember correctly, is 3000 yen and for a VRMMO, this is quite an expensive one. But, the amount that an average player gets on a monthly turn is at best, a tenth of that... in the area of a few hundred yen supposedly. However, perhaps you can say that their gambling nature is high... and on rare occasions, some guy will come out with a bang and find a precious rare item. After disposing of it through in-game auctions, if they exchange the electronic money from the sale it can amount to anywhere between tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of yen. If you heard about a story like that you will probably get the feeling that 'some day it will happen to me too...' Inside that game is like being inside a huge casino."

"Hmmm, I see..."

"So, a «Pro» is someone who earns money constantly every month. Top players get around 200,000 to 300,000 yen^[9] per month supposedly. If you compare that amount with real-world standards it might not seem like such a big deal... but, without luxuries, it's enough to live on. In other words, what it comes down to is that these people are making their income from the monthly fees paid by the players in the volume zone. That's what I meant by what I said earlier, about the top players in GGO being envied more than in other games. It's similar to a government official eating stupidly expensive cakes with taxpayer's money."

"Fufufu, as usual Kirito-kun says things in such a harsh way. I like that part of you."

Without taking notice of Kikuoka's words of feigned ignorance, I interrupted him.

"—For those reasons, the time spent and enthusiasm of GGO's high level crowd can't be compared to other MMO players. I, without any intricate

knowledge of the details of game mechanics, cannot go in blindly and compete with these people. In the first place, as the name implies, it's a game where gunfights are the main form of combat... I'm not good with projectile weapons. My condolences but you'll have to pick someone else to do your bidding."

"Wait wait, there's really no one else I can rely on. For me, you're the only one because you're the only VRMMO player that I can get into contact with in reality. Besides... if you're saying that professional opponents are a heavy burden and that they get their salary from this game, then it's fine if you treat this as a job as well."

"...What?"

"Paid compensation for collaborative investigation. It may... not be the same amount that top players in GGO earn monthly, it is only this much."

Seeing Kikuoka's gesture of raising 3 fingers—

Frankly, I shuddered. If you had that much, the latest 24-core grade CPU in a new machine could be paid for with spare change left over. However, once again, renewed suspicion arose.

"...Don't lead me on, Kikuoka-san. Why does this matter have to be obsessed over this much? This is almost certainly a retrofitted rumor, occult talk that's common to occur on the net, I believe. The two people that got a heart attack, who hadn't shown their figures in game because of it, that kind of fabled story being concocted."

When asked openly, Kikuoka used his slender finger to adjust his glasses, hiding his expression from me. There was no doubt that he was considering just how much of his answer would be the truth, and how much of it would be deception. What a cunning man.

"—Actually, my superiors are the ones concerned about it."

The high-level official who began to speak returned to his usual smile.

"Full Dive technology's influence on reality is the most notable among the fields at the moment. The impact on society and culture is certainly great, but in the field of biology it has also attracted much controversy. Such as: in which ways can virtual worlds change a human's way of existence? Hypothetically speaking, if there are any signs of danger, and that kind of conclusion was reached, a movement to put regulations on it will come

about. In fact, it reached the stage of right before a legislation being passed at the time of the SAO incident. But I— or rather, the virtual department, did not consider retreating in front of the flow as the proper course of action for the enjoyment of VRMMO games, and for the sake of your new era of youths too. That is why, before this one incident attracts strange attention, we want to know all the facts before it can be used by the regulation advocates. It would be best if it was merely a hoax but what we want is to be certain of it. —Up until now, in any way we can."

"...With that understanding of the youths of the VR game generation, your principles, I'll just interpret them as good will. But if you really are concerned about that issue, what about direct hits on the operating company? If you analyze the logs, you should be able to investigate the player who shot «Zekushiido» and «Tarako». Even if the personal information registered in the game is fake, you could still contact the provider from the IP address, and you would find out his real name and address that way."

"—As long as my arms are, even they cannot reach the other side of the Pacific Ocean."

Kikuoka's frown had, this time around, seemed to display an unfeigned weariness.

"«Zasker», the company that develops and operates Gun Gale Online... is an unknown organization that we know next to nothing about and they have their server in America. While the in-game player support seems to be fairly solid, let alone the real address, even the phone number and e-mail address are kept private. Good grief, ever since «The Seed» got publicized, it's one of those sort of shady VR worlds that have been sprouting non-stop like weeds."

"...Oh, is that so?"

I interrupted, while shrugging. Only Agil and I knew about the origin of the VRMMO development support package «The Seed». Similarly, the sudden appearance of the floating castle Aincrad in the reborn ALFheim Online was, to the general public, a leftover from the former SAO server that was managed by the currently non-existing RECTO Progress, which is how the matter was settled.

"And well, for that reason, if we're thinking about grasping the truth of the matter, we have no choice but to get into direct contact within the game. Of

course, we'll consider even the most remote possibilities, and the utmost of safety measures will be taken. Kirito-kun will, in a room prepared by us, dive into the game, and we will disconnect you right away if there are any abnormalities in the output of the AmuSphere being monitored. I won't ask you to get shot; it's fine as long as you get me an impression from what you see. —You'll do it right?"

Before I had realized it, even my mind was stuck in this situation where I couldn't say no.

I really shouldn't have come to meet him... While seriously regretting the decision, I began to feel a slight amount of interest at the same time.

The ability to interfere with the real world from inside the virtual world... If such a thing really existed, then was it a clue to the world alteration that Kayaba Akihiko was striving for? The incident that began in the winter three years ago, was it still unresolved...?

If that was the case, then the obligation of witnessing the destination of its development would be mine as well.

I shut my eyes tightly, took a deep breath, and spoke.

"...I understand. As annoying of a ride as it'll be, if it's just going into the game then I'll go. But I don't know whether or not I will encounter this «Death Gun». In the first place, even his existence is questionable."

"Ahh... About that."

Kikuoka grinned with an innocent face.

"Did I not mention it? During the first shooting incident, one of the players present took an audio log of it which I compressed and brought the data along. It's «Death Gun»-shi's voice and by all means, listen to it."

To the Kikuoka holding out the wireless earphone, I seriously cursed 'that heart of yours should stop' in my thoughts, while glaring at him.

"...thanks for going out of your way to do this."

After putting on the earphones I had received, Kikuoka prodded the screen with his finger. Soon, a low bustling was playing in my head.

Then, the bustling disappeared suddenly and the strained silence that followed was torn by a sharp declaration.

"This is real power, real strength! Foolish people, engrave the fear of these names in your hearts!"

"This gun's name and mine: «Death Pistol»... «Death Gun»!"

It was tinged with a somewhat inhuman, metallic sound.

And yet, from behind the cry, I could strongly feel the presence of the living player behind the character. The owner of this voice, rather than just role-playing, seemed to radiate the genuine urge of the desire for slaughter.

"A while back in SAO, there was a guy called «Hokkai Ikura»^[6]

Chapter 2

She checked the watch on her left wrist as she exited the C10 exit of Chiyoda Line's Otemachi Station.

There was more than five minutes left before the agreed time of 3:00 pm. As Yuuki Asuna was about to lower her wrist, her eyes paused casually at the small calendar window in the watch's dial.

Sunday, December 7th, 2025.

It may not be a special anniversary, but within Asuna's chest, the seed of a certain strong emotion had sprouted. As she began to walk along Eitai Street^[10], she looked up, facing the main gates of the Imperial Palace and murmured without letting her voice out.

—Soon, it will have been one year...

Left unspoken were the words, "since my return to the real world."

After the floating castle of steel (SAO), to the bird cage in the treetops (ALO), she was subsequently rescued and returned to the real world in mid-January of this year. The fantasy world was gradually becoming a memory, but even so, she still occasionally felt strange about herself living like this in the real world.

The wide walkway paved with stone, the roadside trees shaking in the cold air and pedestrians walking with their faces buried beneath the collars of their coats or mufflers. Walking slowly in the midst flow of the crowd, was Asuna herself.

Everything around her was not digitally coded 3D objects, but real minerals, plants and creatures.

But how do we interpret what «real» is? If it's just made with atoms and molecules, then it would be the same as virtual polygons. Because those polygons' real identity are electrons contained in a server memory element. That is not much of a difference in elementary particles.

Saying that, the only problem probably comes from reversibility. The objects that exist in the real world, whether biological or non-living; if they were destroyed, it was impossible to recover them to the original state. But in the virtual world, then it is easy to regenerate the original object without a single byte of bad information.

...No.

That's not it. In that world – in Aincrad, what you lost and what you could not recover really existed. The two years spent in that floating castle, what Asuna touched, felt, obtained and lost were without a doubt all «real».

If that was the case.

"....The differences between the real world and the virtual world... what are they....?"

She unconsciously whispered, and to her question -.

"Just the quantity of information."

Came an answer from beside her, its unexpectedness caused Asuna to jump.

"Wa, waa!?"

She hurriedly looked for the source of that voice and noticing a boy's face, blinking in surprise.

Slightly long front hair. A very thin profile, but it made him look sharp. Dressed in a black shirt with a black jacket over it and faded black jeans.

His appearance is very similar to the avatar he used, the fact that there wasn't a sword hilt on his back felt very unnatural. Asuna took deep breaths to dissolve the sweet ache of longing arising from deep within her heart; she opened her lips and said.

"...I was surprised because you appeared so suddenly, did you use a transfer crystal?"

After hearing this, the boy— Kirigaya Kazuto revealed a bitter smile.

"It's not suddenly. Is this not the agreed time and place?"

"Eh...."

After being asked, Asuna looked around again.

The soft afternoon sunlight bathed the pedestrian street, and with the light flashing from the water surface. A little bit in front, a bridge connected with a large solemnly guarded door. Indeed, it was in front of the Imperial

Palace, where she had arranged to meet with Kazuto. It seemed she was walking while thinking, and had reached the destination.

Asuna gave a shy smile and shrugged her shoulders.

"Ahaha, it seems like I was on autopilot. Umm... anyway, good day Kirito-kun."

"That's dangerous, the real world doesn't have navigation function. ...Hello Asuna."

After greeting each other, Kazuto's black eyes suddenly narrowed, staring at Asuna.

"Wh... what? What happened to you suddenly?"

Wondering if something strange happened, Asuna put her hands in front of her and asked. Then Kazuto hurriedly shook his head, and stammered:

"Ah, no, that is... Umm... I think this dress fits you well, it reminds me of..."

"Eh....?"

She unintentionally looked down at her form, it took two seconds for her to fully understand what he had said to her.

Today she was wearing a winter coat made of white tweed. Below that a knitted ivory and red checkered argyle skirt.

In short, all of the colors were associated with the no longer existing guild, «Knights of the Blood». Thinking back, in Aincrad almost every day, she was dressed in the red and white knight uniform. That probably awoke Kazuto's memory of those days.

Touching the left waist area with her fingers, Asuna gave a smile.

"...That's true. But I don't have a rapier... —That's right Kirito-kun too, today you are dressed entirely in black."

Hearing that, Kazuto also gave a shy smile.

"But without the two swords. ...In fact, I have been trying to avoid wearing black from top to bottom, but Suguha was washing our clothes this morning, and these are all I had left."

"That can happen if you leave your laundry lying around."

Her cuff met Kazuto's, and they held hands.

"Well, today we accidentally wore the «colors from those old days». What a coincidence."

She said while looking from a slightly higher position into Kazuto's eyes. Kazuto gave a small cough, and a monotone answer:

"Well, we have been meeting for a year like this; it was bound to happen sometime."

"Oh you, there you should have just said 'That's right!'"

Asuna gave a small pout then pulled the hand in the leather jacket.

"I say, don't just stand while talking, let's go. The day will get dark soon."

"Oh, okay."

Asuna stuck close to the nodding Kazuto, and the two headed over the bridge.

The old-style main gates against the white walls were shrouded in red sunset, casting black shadows on the bridge. Although it was Sunday, there were very few tourists due to the season.

They passed by the guards in thick coats, through the gate, and obtained a plastic admission ticket from a small office. Through the silver fence, it was hard to believe that it was the center within central Tokyo, with a vast and quiet stretch of woods.

Although it was Asuna who asked where they should go on Sunday, it was Kazuto who decided the meeting place to be «in front of the main gates».

The Imperial Palace itself was not open to the public, but within the moat, the «East Garden» in the northeast corner, was open to the general public on selected days of the week— that information, Asuna had not known until today. Of course, it was the first time she had actually stepped in there. Walking on the broad and fascinating trail, Asuna once again felt a strange feeling, she turned to the boy beside her and asked:

"...Oh yes, why did you choose the Imperial Palace for our date? Kirito-kun, are you interested in history?"

"Well, not really. The main reason was... recently, I was called around here for some stupid business..."

For one moment, his nose flared while remembering something, but soon returned to his original serene smile and continued.

"I'll tell you about that later, but don't you think that the Imperial Palace is a somewhat interesting place?"

"...Interesting? How so?"

Kazuto blinked his eyes, pointing his jacket right arm at the thick trees around.

"North-south about 2 kilometers, the east-west span 1.5 km. The north park and outer gardens combined area are approximately 2.3 million square meters, occupying twenty percent of Chiyoda-ku^[11]. Compared to the Vatican or Buckingham Palace, this is much larger, but it loses to the Palace of Versailles... It's not only the surface, there is not a single underground railway or tunnel below, and no type of aircraft is allowed to fly above. In short this place is a vertical wall through the center of Tokyo, a huge no entry area."

Hearing that, Asuna pictured a map of Tokyo in her head. Moving her left index finger round and round in the air, she nodded in understanding.

"That is to say, the heart of most of the trunk roads, ring lines, radial lines, is based on this point as the center...."

"That's right, Tokyo is not checker board shaped like Kyoto, it is disc-shaped, with a radial concentric circle city. And that center, not just the physical level, even information has been perfectly blocked. Like the old ALO «World Tree»... sorry. I remind you of the bad memories."

"No, I am fine."

For Asuna who had experienced long imprisonment in the old World Tree, she shook her head at Kazuto's consideration and asked:

"Prohibition on the physical level, I understand... but information, what do you mean?"

"Ah, that..."

Kazuto suddenly glanced at the surrounding trees, and with small hand movement points to several areas.

"You see, there and there, have surveillance cameras, right? That security system, it is now on a completely standalone system. This is a private closed network with not a single connection from the outside."

"Ah... Oh yea, the camera has a weird shape."

Looking at where Kazuto pointed, she saw a black sphere on top of a pole. It looks more like lighting than a camera if you don't know about it.

"The next generation security technology is being tested, I heard the rumor... —In short, this place is the center of Tokyo, but at the same time, an isolated «other world» as well... I might be exaggerating a bit."

"Ahaha, a little."

While chatting, they went by a huge stone wall, and the walkway changed to a ramp going up. After walking in silence for a while, their view opened up fully.

The other side is a huge lawn, almost hazy in its size. As it was winter, the grass had withered to a light brown, the leaves on the trees around had almost all fallen. With the arrival of spring, it would be a refreshing view.

"This is the Edo Castle ruins. In historical plays, the inner palace used for stage is supposed to be a bit north of the grass fields."

"Let's go see!"

Holding his hand again, Asuna began to pick up the pace. There were still not many people; most of them were foreign tourists. On the way, they passed a family with two cute-blond sisters, and a husband and wife, who requested their help to take a picture. After Kazuto happily did so, the wife smiled and said, "We will take a picture of you two as well", Asuna shyly stood beside Kazuto as their picture was taken.

After receiving the image data on the mobile phone, we parted from the young sisters as we waved goodbye. After seeing the family moving further away in the orange colored light, Asuna sighed involuntarily.

"...Tired?"

With Kazuto's question, she inadvertently caught a brief glimpse from him.

"W-R-O-N-G! I want our future to also be like.... that, um... really!"

Her cheeks blushing at the line she blurted without thinking, she bolted ahead in a scurry.

"H, Hey, wait up!"

While in a short race with Kazuto chasing, they soon came to a fork in the road splitting to the north and south of the lawn. At the fork in the road was a bench, she sat down on it.

Even so she turned her face away, and Kazuto who sat next to her shyly said:

"Mm, well, that is... if she gets a younger sister, I'm sure Yui will be happy, yea."

Hearing something that was too similar to a fastball, Asuna's blood rushed to her cheeks once again, she giggled.

"Y, you're right."

"Come on, laughing now is mean of you..."

"Ahaha, sorry sorry. But really, it would be nice if Yui-chan could cross over to this side and live with us too..."

What they're referring to by Yui, was the name a young girl they both met in the former SAO server. Her true form was actually a players' self-regulation program for mental maintenance, that is, an AI. She recognized Asuna as her mother and Kazuto as her father. When Aincrad was on the verge of collapsing, her core program was saved to Kazuto's Nerve Gear and was spared from being deleted. Currently, in Kazuto's room, she was «living» inside a dedicated stationary-type machine prepared by him.

But, direct contact with Yui was only possible exclusively under a full dive environment— in other words, within ALO only. Although in the real world you could use a mobile phone and have her there, the battery capacity was not long enough and they could not «always be together»."

So, even if Asuna loved Yui like a daughter, and Yui yearned for Asuna as a mother, there was always a wall in the space between the two of them, separating them between the virtual world and the real world...

Suddenly, Kazuto held onto Asuna's left hand.

"Don't worry, one day we'll be able to live together. FullDive technology will evolve more, and AR^[12] environments will become more commonly used, surely."

"Mm... Right... that's right."

"Yeah. The boundary between real and virtual will become more and more blurred in the future. Right now, there's still a difference in the amount of information making a wall though..."

After listening to Kazuto talk, Asuna deeply bowed her head, and firmly held his hand, then suddenly raised her head.

"Oh that's right, you said that earlier. The difference between the virtual world and the real world is only the amount of information. What did you mean by that?"

"That is..."

Kazuto looked away for an instant, and then looked to their hands together on the bench.

"For example, within ALO, holding hands like this, it is different from the real world right?"

After being told, Asuna focused her senses on her left hand.

The elastic of the palms in contact. The warmth that drove away the cold winter air. Thus far, the ALO fairy avatar could feel the same thing. However, the skin to skin attraction, the friction of their palm lines, and the weak pulse due to their blood flow, is something that even the most advanced FullDive virtual technology could not fully reproduce.

"Yeah... that's right. The real hand can feel a lot more... I see, this is «more information», right?"

"Yes. But afterwards Amusphere will continue to evolve, what happens when the feeling of skin and the throbbing can be reproduced? Only through contact, are you able to distinguish between a real and an avatar hand?"

"I can."

Asuna's immediate answer, was beyond Kazuto's expectation, so he blinked. Looking at his face, Asuna went on to add:

"If it was Kirito-kun's hand, that is. If it was someone else, then probably not."

At that moment, Kazuto's hand temperature and pulse increased. Upon noticing this, Asuna laughed and continued:

"Not just touch, but sight, sound, taste and smell all have more information in the real world now. So... even if the current Amusphere has AR function..."

"Yes. After looking or touching, you will know whether it's real or not."

AR function means to use the Amusphere while awake, combining real sight and sound with digital information. If that was possible, then it could replace computers and mobile phones. In your view, you could have a virtual desktop where you could browse the net or type mail, do street navigation, have information tags on people or things, the use would only be limited by imagination.

Currently, RECTO started working with large information producers to develop that machine, but due to physical activity leading to the pulse focus being shifted, the need for high-capacity battery, and other problems, it had not reached a practical level.

"...Unfortunately, with the current headgear type, there is argument that constant AR is not possible. However, one day there will be a breakthrough in technology, if we are able receive large capacity five senses data in the real world... Or if, without a bed and electrical plug, we can full dive anytime."

Asuna nodded to Kazuto's words, and continued where he left off.

"We will cross the barriers of the world, and be together with Yui always. ...That day will surely come."

"Yes, for sure."

Their words, without a doubt, were almost the same as what they said while thinking of the separated Yui in the twenty-second floor in Aincrad. Noticing that, Asuna felt a warm feeling spreading through her body and rested her head on Kazuto's right shoulder.

That reunion promise, was delivered in a few months.

That's why for sure; their words now would soon become a reality.

The short winter day made the sun seem like it was falling behind the trees to the west. The sky was dyed red; the returning birds were flying in groups.

Hundreds of years ago, the people who lived in the city on that huge lawn probably looked at the same sunset. And then hundreds of years in the future, in a different world changed by time, someone will look at this same red sky...

"...Ah..."

Asuna's chest suddenly tightened with a homesick feeling and she gently sighed. She glanced at Kazuto beside her. When she met his eyes, she smiled.

"Somehow, I understand. The reason why you brought me here."

"Eh... you do?"

"Yes. —If the world exists in the «time» axis and the «space» area, then Tokyo... that is to say that the center of our real world is without a doubt this place. Then... currently the center axis of the virtual worlds that are expanding due to «The Seed» is, the no longer existing, that «castle». That's why this sunset color, is so nostalgic..."

At Asuna's words, Kazuto blinked several times before he opened his mouth wide.

"I see... that might be. I did not really consider that aspect. But... after listening to Asuna's words, I am able to understand one thing."

"Eh, what is it?"

"Aincrad's shape. It might be that laminated conical structure is a symbol of the «time axis and space area»."

Asuna thought for a moment and then nodded slowly.

"Yes... that might be true. But if that were so, the world that Leader created, with a sophisticated schedule, will converge and perish. That is, if someone or other didn't make it suffer a huge explosion in the middle of it."

"S, sorry... Miss sub-leader."

They both softly laughed at the same time. After a few seconds, Kazuto took a deep breath, and still holding hands with Asuna, he stood up from the bench.

"Now then, it's about time we head home; this place closes at five."

"Mm, next time let's bring Lisbeth and Lyfa-chan as well. Eating lunch on the lawn will be a very happy occasion, surely."

"Sure, when it's spring. Of course."

Pulling on Kazuto's hand, Asuna stood up as well, and she looked to the sky and the sunset one more time.

I want to go home, she thought. However, Miyasaka in Setagaya-ku, where the Yuuki residence was located in the real world, was not the home she thought of. Their «forest home» on the twenty-second floor of Aincrad, though it existed only for a short time, was the home she was referring to.

Although that little log house was erased, along with the collapse of the floating castle— now to Asuna, a single warm place existed in her heart. Prior to its realization, above Alfheim's World Tree, the rented house in «Yggdrasil City» had become Asuna, Kirito and Yui's home.

Walking toward the north Hirakawa gate exit, Asuna asked Kirito:

"Hey, can you login tonight? I want to tell Yui all about today."



"Yeah, sure. Around 10pm should be fine."

He smiled and nodded, and suddenly began to express a very difficult expression.

"Huh, did you have something to do?"

"No, that's not it. Tonight should be okay though... That is, Asuna, I..."

Kazuto, who rarely stammered when he spoke, mumbled "Uhh— umm— err" for a few seconds, but what he said next would scare Asuna:

"...I, very soon, might transfer ALO's «Kirito» to another game..."

"...Eh, eeeh!?"

Birds erupted from the tree nearby in response to Asuna's sudden exclamation of surprise.

Chapter 3

Twilight.

The low lying clouds were stained yellow by the setting sun.

In the wilderness of rock and sand, the shadow cast by the tall relic building ruins was getting longer and longer. If we continued to wait for another hour, we must consider switching to night combat equipment.

Fighting with night vision goggles dampened the excitement of killing or being killed, so it was not Sinon's preferred way. Before the sun fully disappears, please let the target party appear quickly, she muttered while crouching behind the concrete. Moreover, her five partners who were also waiting gloomily in ambush were no doubt thinking of the same thing.

Voicing the doubt lurking within everyone's mind, a front line party member lowered his small-caliber short handled gun and whispered.

"Really, how much longer are we supposed to wait... Hey Dyne, are they really going to come? Is the information reliable?"

The man in question, Dyne, with his large rock-solid body and rough face, is their squadron (guild) leader; he lowered the large assault rifle from his shoulder and said while shaking his head.

"Those guys have been using the same route to go hunting for the past three weeks, at nearly the same time everyday. I have personally confirmed that information. Indeed today they are a bit late; they must have ran into some Mob (Monster). That means our share will increase, so stop complaining. "

"But."

The front line man became even more displeased and pouted.

"Today's prey is the same group we attacked the previous week, right? They may have changed their route as a precaution..."

"It has been six days since the previous ambush. Since then, they have always gone to the same hunting grounds. They are a squadron specialized for farming Mobs..."

On Dyne's face, was a mocking smile.

"No matter how many times they were attacked, even if their loot was robbed, they think that they just need to hunt more to make up for the loss. For anti-personnel squadrons like us, they are the best prey, and we can do this two or three more times."

"But, that's hard to believe. Normally, if people were attacked once, they will come up with some kind of counter measure."

"The day after they may be alert, but people become careless after a while, as they are used to fighting the predictable algorithms of field Mobs every day. Because they hunt only those Mobs for so long, their repetitive farming makes them act like Mobs themselves. Just a bunch of people without any pride."

The more Sinon heard, the more unpleasant she felt. She buried her face deeper into her muffler, and emotional fluctuations slowed her trigger finger down. Although she understood all of that, hearing Dyne's impertinent speech caused irritation to bubble up in her heart.

Laughing at a specialized routine Mob hunting party, his own supposedly PvP (Anti-personnel) squad ambushing that kind of party in a similar fashion didn't seem to hurt his pride. Instead of waiting for so many hours in this neutral field, it would be better to go to the underground ruins and fight a high level squadron that would result in higher gains.

Of course, the chance of total defeat, dropping equipment, and returning to the street through «Death Return» was higher too. But that is what a real battle is and only through that sort of tension was the soul forged.

It had been two weeks since she was invited to this squadron that Dyne led, and she soon regretted joining. Their PvP main objective was sort of a lie, because they only went after weaker opponents. And if there was even a minuscule sign of danger, they would retreat; it's a safety first kind of group.

So far Sinon had followed the squadron policy without a single objection, quietly following Dyne's instructions and pulling the trigger. However, she was not doing it out of loyalty. She was gathering data on his way of thinking and trying to learn his movements, for if they became enemies on the battlefield one day, she would need to put a bullet between his eyebrows (head shot).

She didn't like his personality, but in the previous Bullet of Bullets he was ranked 18th. His strength came from his stats build and the rare «SIG

SG550» assault rifle below his shoulder. Spitting out 5.56mm caliber bullets, the assault rifle was undeniably powerful. That's why she kept silent and just continued flashing her eyes, collecting information that the unguarded Dyne spilled out.

Dyne continued his speech.

"...In general, they usually bring optical guns for hunting Mobs; they should not have prepared enough anti-personnel real bullet guns for everyone. At best, having one support fire gun is the most they can do. To smash that guy, I had Sinon bring her sniper rifle today. There are no blind spots in the battle plan. Right, Sinon?"

Having the conversation suddenly turn toward her, Sinon slightly nodded with her face buried in the muffler. She kept her mouth shut, showing no intention of joining the conversation.

Dyne made a bored snort, but an attacker turned to grin at Sinon and said:

"Well, that is true. Sinon's long distance sniping being one of the best hasn't changed. —Oh, that's right, Sinon..."

With a smile on his face and without leaving the cover of the material's shadow, the attacker crawled on all fours to Sinon's side.

"Today, do you have time afterwards? I would like your advice on improving my sniping skill. Would you have a cup of tea somewhere with me?"

Sinon took a quick glance at the weapon on the man's waist. His main weapon was a bullet type sub-machine gun «H&K UMP». He seemed to be an AGI type. His evasion during face-to-face battle was above average, but his level and equipment information didn't make him enough of an opponent to be worth memorizing. She had to think hard to remember his name, and she bent her head slightly.

"...Sorry, Ginrou-san. Today, I am busy in the real world..."

Her voice was similar, though not the same as her real world voice. It made a high, clear and cute sound that made her feel tired inside, which was the reason why she disliked speaking. The man called Ginrou didn't seem to care that he was rejected, and his ecstatic smile never faded. It seems that for certain male players, just hearing Sinon's voice made them

feel a certain arousal and thinking about that made her break out in cold sweat.

When she first started this VRMMO-RPG «Gun Gale Online», she wanted her avatar to be male, with rough and no personality types. She soon found out from the title choice that you can't pick a gender different from the player, so then she wanted to be tall and muscular, like a female soldier, she thought.

However, generated according to random parameters, was a small and delicate female shape, almost doll-like. She instantly thought of deleting that account and making another one. But her friend, who had invited her to this game, had said "What a waste!". Due to his strong insistence, and since she had gained so many levels in the meantime, she couldn't start over again.

Because of her looks, once in a while troublesome events like these happened to her. For Sinon, whose only motivation in the game was fighting, this was just depressing.

"I see, Sinon, are you a student in the real world? A university student? Do you have to write a report or something?"

"...Yea, well..."

As a result, if he had failed once, then he might use school as an excuse to relentlessly invite her. She was actually a high school student, but that was something no one would hear from her mouth.

Then, the other two front line men, who had been tinkering with their status windows, came near as if to restrain Ginrou. One of them, with smoke treated goggles and green front hair, opened his mouth.

"Ginrou-san, you can see that Sinon-san is troubled. Don't talk about real-world subjects here."

"That's right, both he and I are lonely bachelors."

The other, a man with camouflage helmet, grinned, then Ginrou pushed on both their heads with his fists spinning and replied,

"Say what, you two obviously haven't had a spring in many years."

Sinon shrunk her body more beside the three "Hahaha" laughing men and had to wonder.

When the battle is for fighting against other players, while waiting you should concentrate, check your equipment, or find some other useful way of passing time. If you just wanted to make money to convert to electronic money, then joining a Mob hunt squadron would be better. If you just want to meet girls, then even in a fixed-gender kind of title, it doesn't have to be in this unpleasant killing world; a fairy tale game with more female players would be a better choice. What is the reason that these people come to this world anyway?

Burying her face deeply into her muffler again, Sinon used her left hand to caress the body of the large rifle sitting on a two leg stand next to her.

—One day, I will use this gun to blow away your avatar body. After that, can you still smile while talking to me?

She whispered deep in her mind, and as if her irritation was being absorbed by the cold rifle barrel, she slowly calmed down.

"—They are coming."

Whispered the last member of the party twenty minutes later. He had continued to scout for enemies with his binoculars from a hole in the broken concrete wall.

The three front line men and Dyne paused their conversation and the atmosphere suddenly became tense.

Sinon glanced up to the sky. The yellow clouds had slowly turned red, but the brightness was still adequate enough.

"They finally appeared."

After muttering quietly, Dyne moved while crouching down and took the binoculars from the scout. He looked out of a hole with them to check the enemy combat strength.

"...Those are our guys. Seven people... that's one more than last week. Four front line people with optical type Blasters. One person with large caliber laser rifle. And... yes, one person with a «Minimi^[13]». That guy used an optical gun the previous week, he must have changed to an actual bullet type in a hurry. He will be the one we snipe. The last person... is covered in a cloak so his weapon cannot be seen..."

Hearing this, Sinon got into her sniping position and placed her face near her rifle's high powered magnification scope.

The six people of Sinon's party were hiding in the ruins of a previous civilization that was built at a slightly higher place. The broken concrete wall and steel frames provided ample cover, and it was the best location to observe the vast wilderness in front.

She looked at the sky again, checking to see if the virtual sun was in a place that would reflect off the lens. Once she confirmed that it wouldn't, she flipped open the scope's front and back flip-up covers.

She put her right eye against the lens, at the lowest magnification, she confirmed small dots moving in the wilderness. She used her fingers to change the magnification dial. With small click sounds, the sesame sized black dots became bigger and bigger, eventually changing to seven players.

Like Dyne said, four people had optical type attack guns, and two of those four had binoculars on their faces, scanning the perimeter. However, to find Sinon's group which was hiding, unless they have maxed the enemy search skill, it was almost impossible.

In the middle of the enemy group were two people walking with large guns on their shoulders. One had a semi-automatic optical laser rifle, the other had a live bullet type light machine gun, «FN Minimi». In the real world, the Japanese self-defense force use them as excellent support weapons. Since over half of optical guns' damage can be reduced by defense fields, the Minimi has an overwhelmingly higher threat.

The two types of weapons found in «Gun Gale Online», live ammunition gun and optical gun, are very different from each other.

The advantages of live bullets is one hit will cause large damage, and it passes through defense fields. But the disadvantages are that you have to carry extra heavy bullet magazines around, and the bullet trajectory is affected a lot by wind and humidity.

In contrast, the optical gun is very light, can hit long range with high precision, and has a smaller magazine pack size. On the other hand, players with defensive equipment could disperse its damage.

For the above reasons, use optical gun against monsters, use live ammo gun against players is the common theory. For these two categories, other than performance characteristics they are quite different.

That is because, the optical guns all have fanciful names and shapes, while live ammo guns have their original shape that actually exists in the real world.

Therefore, like Dyne and Ginrou, a significant percentage of GGO players are gun maniacs who like to hold live ammo weapons, and only switch to optical guns when they are hunting Mobs.

Now, the rifle near Sinon's cheek is a live ammo type. But before she came to this world, she didn't know anything about gun makers. For game play, it was necessary for her to memorize guns like items, but that didn't mean she had any interest in real guns. She believed that the infinite guns in this world were all 3D objects, since she disliked even looking at guns in the real world.

Just one thing. In this world of slaughter, she wanted to continue destroying virtual enemies with virtual bullets until her heart became as hard as a stone and her flowing blood froze.

For that reason, Sinon would pull the trigger today too.

She shook off her excess thinking and moved her rifle a little. At the end of the enemy line, a player walked with massive goggles covering his face and a camouflage cloak and coat covering his body. Like Dyne said, his equipment could not be seen.

He had a huge body. He might have been wearing a large backpack that made his cloak bulge. His hands sticking out of his sleeves were empty. From the look of equipment on his waist, the largest seemed to be sub-machine gun type.

"Because of the cloak, you cannot see his face?"

Behind her came the voice of Ginrou. He might have been joking, but his voice also contained some tension as he continued.

"Can he be that one? The rumored... «Death Gun»."

"Ah, no way. He can't be real."

Dyne quickly replied with a laugh.

"Also, isn't Death Gun supposed to be a small guy wearing a camouflage Ghillie suit? This guy is too big. He is nearly two meters tall. Probably... extreme STR type courier. Carrying found items, ammunition and energy

packs. He shouldn't have any large weapon, we can just ignore him in battle."

While listening to these words, Sinon carefully looked at the man in her scope.

Because of the rough armor goggles, his expression couldn't be seen. The only thing exposed was his mouth. His lips were tight together, without a slight movement. The other members, even on alert, were chatting and showing flashes of their white teeth. Only that big man in the back was totally tranquil, silently walking and moving his feet without a single disturbance.

Sinon's intuition from half a year of experience in playing GGO told her that this man was a stronger threat than the one carrying the Minimi. However, other than the backpack, there didn't seem to be any bulges in the cloak. He might be hiding a small high power rare gun. But that kind of gun was mostly optical type, which is not too useful in anti-personnel combat. Then was her feeling of pressure from this man just her imagination...

Lost in thought, Sinon spoke quietly:

"That man, I have a bad feeling. I would like to take out the cloaked man first."

Dyne removed the binoculars from his face, and looked at Sinon with raised eyebrows.

"Why? He clearly isn't carrying any powerful weapon."

"... Although there is no basis. Because of his uncertainties, I have a bad feeling."

"If you are talking about that, the Minimi is obviously a factor of instability. If the Blasters come near while we are dealing with him, then it would be dangerous."

Although defense shields are effective against optical guns, that effect decreases as distance is shortened. In close combat, the number of rounds available in one Laser Blaster magazine could be overwhelming. Sinon grudgingly retracted her opinion and nodded.

"...Understood. The first target is the Minimi. If possible, I want to put the next round into the cloaked man."

Having said that, the most effective sniping is the first shot, before the enemy finds the sniper. After the enemy knew where the shot came from, a «Ballistic Prediction Line» (Bullet Line) is shown to the enemy so they can easily avoid the attack.

"Hey, we don't have much time to talk anymore. Distance 2500."

The scout said after viewing through the binoculars he took back from Dyne. Dyne nodded and turned to the three attackers behind him.

"All right. According to our plan, we will go wait in the shadow of the building till the enemy gets close. —Sinon, after we move we won't be able to see them, so inform us if the situation changes. I will instruct you when to start sniping."

"Understood."

After the short answer, Sinon's right eye once again went to the rifle's scope. The target party had not changed. The members were moving at their usual slow pace through the wilderness.

What separated Sinon from them was 2.5 kilometers of wilderness. In the center a little closer to her side were the ruins of a huge building. The five people including Dyne would use that building and hide in the blind spot, planning to attack violently all at once.

"—Ok, let's go."

To Dyne's short command, the other members except Sinon gave a short reply. With sounds of boots sliding on sand and sand moving, they slid down the back side of the hill. Waiting till the evening wind covered their footsteps, Sinon took out a small headset from below her muffler on her neck and put it on her left ear.

For the next few minutes, as a sniper, Sinon must continuously fight against the pressure and solitude. Her first bullet would affect the battle afterward a lot. The only things she could depend on were her finger and the silent gun. Her left hand caressed the huge gun on two leg stands. The black metal returned cold silence to her.

The reason Sinon was a rare sniper in this world and a relatively well known player was mostly due to the existence of this incredible live ammo gun.

Its name was «PGM Ultima Ratio Hecate II^[14]». Full length 138cm, weight 13.8kg, kind of huge size, .50 caliber, that is it uses a 12.7mm diameter large size bullet.

In the real world it was classified in the anti-matériel sniper rifle category, she heard. That is, it was a gun used against vehicles and buildings. Because of that incredible power, according to some long name article, it's supposed to be forbidden to use against human targets. Of course, this world had no such law.

She got her hand on it three months ago, when she was starting to become a veteran GGO player.

On a whim, she went into the huge ruins dungeon below the capital SBC Gurokken by herself. Due to her inattention, she fell down a chute trap.

Gun Gale Online was set in a stage where the people came back on space ships to live on the world that became a wasteland from long ago civilization's huge war. Gurokken's streets were originally the space ship, and below that slept a huge city of ruins from the war. Inside the city ruins, there were an unlimited number of automated fighting machines and mutant creatures who wait for adventurers who dream of making it big in one scoop. The place Sinon fell to was the lowest floor of that place and had the highest level of danger.

Of course, she did not expect to do much as a solo in that place. Her first encounter would be her easy defeat, and she would go back to her street save point as a «Death Return». She walked while accepting that fact. Then, she arrived at a large circular space like a stadium, where a weirdly shaped creature appeared.

From its size and name, it seemed to be a boss class monster, but she had never seen its shape on any of the information sites. When she realized that, the gamer soul inside her was stimulated slightly. Since I am going to die anyway, let's try fighting this guy. While thinking that she went to an air vent on top of the stadium and placed her rifle.

The battle went in an unexpected way. Of the boss monster's heat ray, iron claws, poison gas and other attack patterns, none of them were able to reach where Sinon was hiding. On the other hand, since it was barely within her rifle's shooting range, the damage inflicted by her was light. Thinking about the amount of ammo she had, without missing even one

shot, she had to hit what seemed to be the boss's weak point, the small eye on its forehead, otherwise it would be impossible to kill it.

Sinon became cool as ice as she concentrated on doing that. When the boss finally fell, its huge body blew up in polygons. The fight had been going on for three hours.

What the boss monster dropped was a huge rifle she had never seen before. Per the setting of the game, NPCs or players could not make higher tier live ammo guns. The street shops could only sell a portion of the lower tier guns, and the above-average guns could only be excavated in ruins. The rifle she obtained— «Ultima Ratio Hecate II», belonged to the rarest group of excavated weapons.

Right now, including Sinon's Hecate II, only about ten anti-matériel rifles existed on the server. As such, their pricing was frighteningly high, and the price of the gun in the last auction was 20 Mega Credits, or 20 million, in game currency. If converted to electronic money using the ratio of 100 to 1, it would be worth 200,000 Japanese yen.

Sinon was a high school student who lived alone in the real world, and the living expenses she received each month were barely enough. Being plagued by hardships, she was truly unsure of what to do with the gun when she found out about its worth. Recently she was able to convert half of her connection fee, 1500 yen, but that still meant half of her pocket money was gone. Saying that, if she dived more than she does now, it would be difficult to maintain her academic grades. However, if she had 200,000 yen, she could pay all of her connection fees with plenty of money left over.

But, Sinon did not sell the gun. The reason she played GGO was not for earning money, it was for killing the enemy— namely everyone stronger than her; it was for conquering her weaknesses. Above everything else, for the first time she felt in her «heart» that this gun wasn't merely an item.

Hecate II, because of its huge size and weight, a fearsome amount of STR setting was required. Sinon as a sniper had her STR higher than AGI, so she was barely able to equip it. The first time she took it to the battlefield, when she looked at the enemy through the scope, she felt its heavy cold weight in her hands, its power and intention. It carved slaughter, a harbinger of death. Sinon wanted to embrace that feeling, not yielding to anything, never wavering, without a single drop of fear, that shape was here.

Shortly after that, Sinon came to be known as «Hecate»; she found out that the name was from Greek mythology, the goddess who governs the underworld. That gun would be her first and last partner, she decided at that time.

Inside her scope, she saw that the target party continued to move.

Sinon lifted her face to look directly at the wilderness. She could see Dyne's group of five moving closer to the fallen building between the target and her. The distance between the two groups had been reduced to about 700 meters. She returned her right eye to the scope and waited for Dyne's instructions.

Tens of seconds later, the headset came to life with his voice and some noise.

"—We are at our position."

"Understood. The enemy's course and speed did not change. They are 400m from you, and 1500m from me."

"Still a long way, can you do it?"

To Dyne's question, Sinon gave a short 'No problem' reply.

"... Good. Begin sniping."

"Understood."

After the brief exchange, Sinon became quiet as her right index finger moved to the large trigger guard.

In the wilderness through the scope, the first target, the man with the Minimi on his shoulder, continued to walk and chat as usual.

In last week's battle, Sinon was not a sniper; she used an assault rifle and was rear support. She should have seen the man at very close range, but she couldn't remember him. However, since he could equip a support weapon, he must be very high level.

Thump, thump, her heart beat rapidly as she matched that rhythm while moving the reticule cross hair. Distance, wind direction, and the target's movement speed meant she would have to target more than one meter to the upper right of him; she moved her finger to touch the actual trigger.

At that moment, in Sinon's viewpoint, a half transparent shining circle of light green appeared.

The diameter of the circle changed waveringly in cycles, it centered on the man's chest, the widest point going to his knee. It was the «Bullet Hit Prediction Circle» (Bullet Circle) that was only shown in Sinon's view. The bullet fired will hit randomly somewhere inside the circle. At the current circle's size, the man's body was covered by 30% of the circle; in other words, 30% accuracy. Like that, no matter how great Hecate II's power is, hitting the extremities, an arm or leg would be impossible to kill him, the one hit kill ratio is too low.

The size of the Bullet Circle depended on the target's distance, gun's performance, weather, light level, skills, and stats values, the most important parameter being the sniper's heart beat.

The Amusphere monitored the real world body's heartbeat and sent that data to the game system.

When the heart beat with a Thump pulse, the circle was at the largest size. It would slowly get smaller, becoming bigger at the next pulse. That is, for the highest accuracy, the sniping must be done in the valley between each heartbeat.

However, the relaxed state is about sixty times per minute— that is one second cycle in the calm state, but the tension from trying to shoot will double or more that rate, with the circle's widening and shortening speed increasing in response. It was impossible to shoot in the valley between the beats.

That was the biggest reason why GGO has so few snipers.

They could not hit. They couldn't stop the tension when they needed to snipe. Of course, in close combat the heart beat could make the Bullet Circle pulse, but you can still hit at short range with that. For full-auto sub-machine guns and assault rifles, that's even more true. However, sniping at a long range distance of over 1000 meters, the Bullet Circle is usually several times of a man in size. Currently in Sinon's view, the 30% accuracy size is already a miracle.

—But.

Sinon whispered in her heart.

This pressure, anxiety, terror is to what kind of extent. Distance of 1500? That is just like throwing a ball of paper into the wastebasket. Yes—

Compared to that time.

The core of her head became cold. Her heartbeat slowed down like a lie.

—Ice. I am a machine made of cold ice.

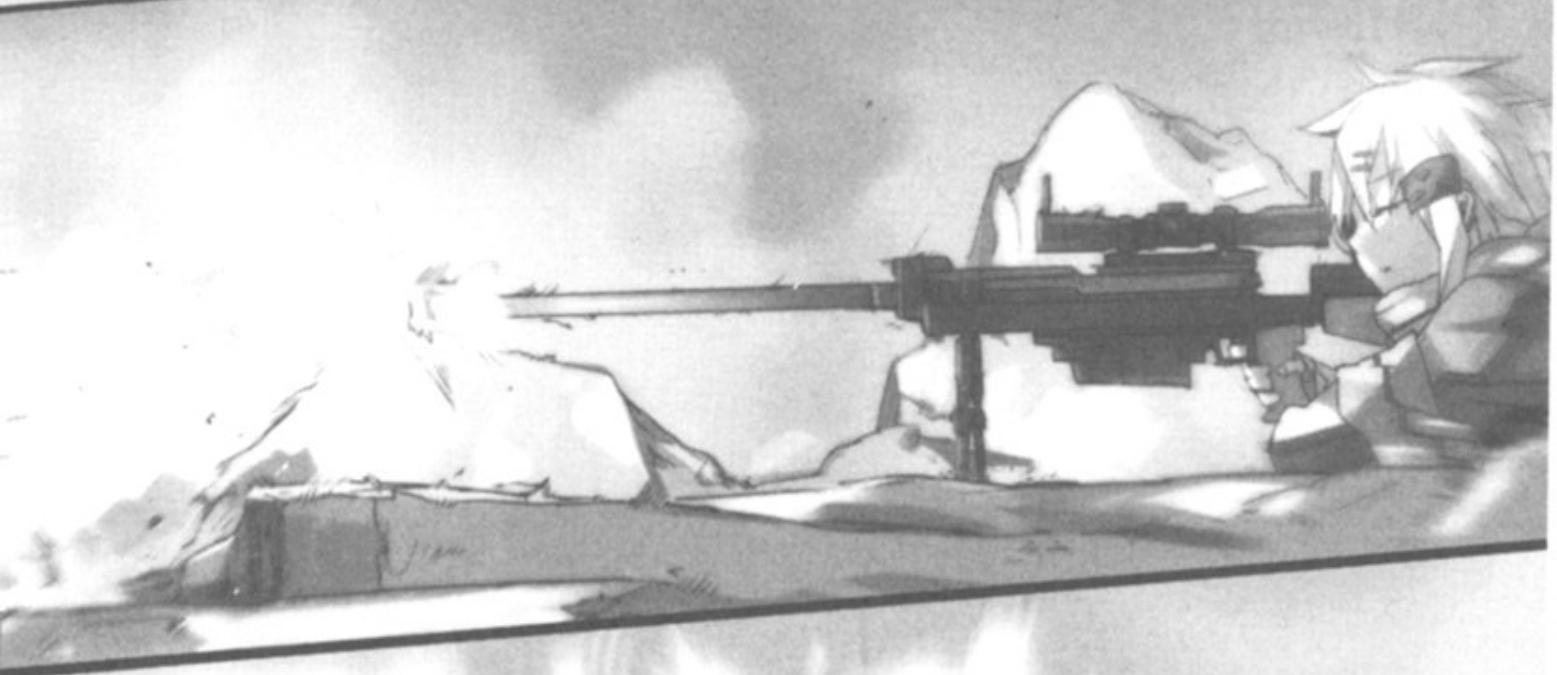
The Bullet Circle change cycle slowed down all at once. At the same time her feeling of time extended, she could clearly tell the instant when the circle was at its smallest size.

One... Two... At the third shrinking circle, when it pointed to the heart of the man carrying the Minimi, Sinon pulled the trigger.

A roar similar to thunder shook the world.

From Hecate II's front side muzzle brake, a huge flame erupted, the released bullet cut through the gun sound and moved forward. The recoil shock pushed Sinon and the rifle back, her two feet braced as she withstood the impact.

At the other end of the reticule, maybe he noticed the muzzle flash, the man turned his head this way. His sight crossed with Sinon who was peering through the scope—



At that instant, the man's chest to his shoulders, including his head, became tiny object fragments and disappeared. A bit later, the rest of his body broke like a glass statue being hit and dispersed in fragments. Unfortunately for him, the fearfully high price Minimi he was carrying became a random drop and fell to the sandy ground. For sure, after that man had returned to the street from revival, he would have to contend with the shock of an instant death and the loss of his weapon.

Sinon confirmed the above without emotion, her right hand moved automatically and pulled Hecate II's bolt handle. With a metallic sound a huge shell was ejected, which disappeared after hitting the rock beside.

While loading the next round of ammunition, Sinon shifted her rifle slightly to the right, the second target, the large man with the cloak was within her scope. The man's goggle covered face was looking straight this way. Aiming a bit above that body, her trigger finger tightened slightly. The green Bullet Circle appeared again, instantly shrinking to a dot.

Only three seconds had passed since her first shot. A semi-automatic rifle can fire continuously, but the bolt action Hecate II could not do that. Even so, for average players, seeing their teammate suddenly pulverized, they would be dismayed and shocked, from there it will take them five seconds to recover their mental state, identify the sniping direction, and get ready to evade. If you aim for that confusion, the second shot being successful will be possible, but—

However, the man in the cloak showed no sign of confusion, from the depths of his large goggles staring straight at Sinon. Sure enough, this guy is a very experienced veteran, he must be a well-known player, Sinon thought as she pulled the trigger.

At this point in the man's field of view, the bullet trajectory aiming for him was shown as a «Ballistic Prediction Line» (Bullet Line), a light red half-translucent light. For gun battles, that is the game's nonsense way of making things more interesting, a defensive system assist. If the player has high reaction, high AGI, and enough courage, he can evade more than 50% of the assault rifle continuously fired bullets from 50 meters.

A sniper class's biggest advantage is that only the first shot won't have a Line shown to the target. However, as Sinon's position had already been exposed from her first shot, she no longer had that advantage.

Another roar. From Hecate II's merciless finger released «Death» crystallized bullet that cut through the light yellow atmosphere and flew away.

But as Sinon expected, the man calmly took a big step to the right. Right after, the 12.7mm bullet cut through the space one meter from the large body. It smashed a hole in a concrete wall in the wilderness far behind him.

Sinon's right hand moved unconsciously, reloading the next round, her finger returning to the grip did not go to the trigger.

Any further sniping would be useless. If she must snipe again, she would have to move from her current position, hiding from that man's sight, and wait 60 seconds for the identification information to reset. However, at that point the battle trend should have been decided. While peering through the scope, she whispered to the receiver.

"First target clear. Second target fail."

Dyne quickly replied.

"Understood. Attack begin. ...Go, Go, Go!!!"

Zhaa! A sound of ground being kicked while moving out lightly reached her. Sinon blew out her held breath slightly.

The mission she had been given was now completed. Since Hecate II was an ultra rare gun, if she took it into face-to-face combat and died, then if the gun drops, it would be a very grave situation. Dyne said she could go on standby after sniping. Her second shot missing remained in her heart, and she wished that the «Bad Feeling» she had would not come to fruition.

While thinking, Sinon again moved her rifle, she lowered the magnification to see the full enemy party in the scope. The four front line men hurriedly jumped behind a close rock or concrete wall to hide, behind them the rear guard with the large laser rifle and that large man in the cloak—

"Ah...!!"

Sinon unconsciously let out a sound. Just then the large man moved both arms, throwing the camouflage cloak from his body.

The man's two hands had no weapon. His waist didn't have a weapon either.

What his broad back was carrying, that we had been thinking of as an item transport backpack, was revealed.

Between his broad shoulders, a metal rail curved and extended. From that hung an uncouth and precise metallic object.

Inside the Y-frame support, was a cylindrical machine component. Its top part had a big carry handle, below that extended a six barrel cluster gun body. Its length was easily over one meter.

The machine component had a belt link built in, it connected to a large capacity ammo box that hung from the same rail.

That so called gun's huge size and vicious shape, Sinon had only seen it once on the GGO information site's weapon list.

Its name seems to be «GE M134 Minigun». Classified under heavy machine guns. One of the largest firearms to debut in Gun Gale Online. The six linked barrels turn at high speed for loading, firing, and shell ejecting, spitting out 7.62mm bullets at a crazy speed of 100 rounds per second, nightmare was a substitute name for this gun— no, this weapon.

Of course, its weight is also tremendous. Just the main body is 18kg. Together with so much ammunition, it should be more than 40kg. No matter what type of pure STR player he is, it's impossible to be within his max weight limit. Of course, being overweight means there should be a movement penalty.

The reason why that party was moving so slowly, was not because of extending the hunt. That was the man's maximum walking speed.

While terrified, Sinon peered into her scope. In the middle of Sinon's field of vision, the big man reached behind his back with his right hand and grabbed the handle of the Minigun. The large machine gun smoothly slid on a rail and rotated 90 degrees to the right side of the man's body. Both legs wide open, with a stance where the six gun barrels facing forward—the man's mouth below his goggles moved for the first time, forming a fierce smile.

Sinon hurriedly adjusted the dial, reducing the scope's magnification to the minimum.

From the left-side field of view, Ginrou's group of three attackers, holding sub-machine guns, were moving forward. The light bullets from the Laser

Blasters that the enemy party's vanguard prepared drew pale blue tails as they met the assault, all of them left ripples, like those on the surface of water, about one meter in front of Ginrou and the others, then disappeared. That was the high performance «Protection Field Against Light Bullets» effect.

Simply because they returned fire with a spray from live ammunition based sub-machine guns, one of the enemy blaster users, who was leaning out from behind a rock was covered in crimson impact effects with a 'pa pa' sound and collapsed. Ginrou and the others pushed forward again, toward the shadow of a concrete wall close to the enemy—

At that time, the big man quickly lowered his waist.

The Minigun's barrels spun at a high-speed, a belt of sparkling light spurting out for as much as 0.3 seconds or so.

Just like that, along with part of the concrete wall, Ginrou's avatar disintegrated, then disappeared. Too quickly, like a sand doll exposed to a water current.

"...!"

Sinon bit her lip then stood up. She picked up Hecate II from the ground, folded the two legs and slung the strap over her shoulder.

The Hecate II, with a total length of 138 cm, dug heavily into the shoulder of Sinon, whose height wasn't even 155 cm, but was still within her weight limit. Her sidearm, the «H&K MP7», was an ultra-compact type sub-machine gun that somehow didn't go over her weight limit, since Sinon's high STR value was just enough to allow her to carry seven magazines for the Hecate II.

Even with the naked eye, she could see the bloom-like muzzle flashes on the battle field nearly one and a half kilometers away. Sinon remained silent, and ran full speed ahead.

Since it had come to that, the flow of the battle had overwhelmingly turned against Dyne and the others. If the Minigun user was alone, then by maintaining at least mid-range distance and constantly moving at high speeds, it would be possible to beat him. However, with the Laser Blaster users providing the Minigun cover, once you closed in to the short range that made defensive field less effective, you could not avoid the opponent.

Although she was a member of the squadron, even if she was to withdraw, she expected that nobody would complain. After all, she had carried out the objective she was commanded to perform as a sniper.

However, Sinon ran in a straight line toward the battle. She was not thinking of helping her companions. Just that Minigun man's smile that floated made Sinon's feet move forward.

That guy could smile on the battlefield only because he had strength. The play time required to obtain the rare Minigun was similar or longer than that of the Hecate. The equipment demanded perseverance to pile on enough STR to be formidable. In addition, the courage he had to calmly deal with Sinon's sniping.

To fight such an opponent, by killing him, the other too weak me—the always sobbing, immature «Asada Shino» would be extinguished.

For that alone, she invested herself in this crazy world. If she was to escape from here, then everything accumulated so far would have been in vain.

Kicking off the dry ground at the highest speed her parameters allowed, tearing through the dusty air, Sinon was at full gallop.

She moved about on the gravel laden sand, avoiding and jumping over protruding rocks, crumbling walls, and others obstacles, rushing into the battle area in just a few tens of seconds.

Her AGI parameter was opened full throttle to assist in making a fierce dash in a straight line. She didn't even slightly consider seeking cover. The enemy group probably already caught Sinon's approaching figure.

Compared to the beginning, the two parties' battle area had shifted significantly. Of course, the ones retreating were Dyne's group. With the Minigun forcibly providing backup with strafing fire, the enemy group's vanguard was pressing the distance steadily. In order to escape the effective range of the optical guns, the four people, including Dyne, were constantly falling back, moving from cover to cover.

Rushing straight into the wilderness to escape was no longer possible. If their figures were exposed, they would be instantly bathed in the Minigun's bullets like a waterfall and honeycombed. Moreover, the concrete wall Dyne and the others now entrusted their backs to was mostly missing in their escape route. That only left the remains of the more than half

collapsed building that their initial approach utilized. If they fled there, they would be trapped like rats in a bag.

Sinon, who instantly understood the situation, tried to jump into the shadow of the wall where Dyne and the others were taking a breather. At that moment, three thin red lines of light appeared right in front of Sinon.

"Ku..."

Clenching her teeth, she entered an evasive stance. These are trajectory lines from the enemy attackers that use Laser Blasters.

First, Sinon lowered her body to the limit and slipped under the first Bullet Line. Immediately after, precisely tracing the line overhead, a pale blue heat ray scorched the space. Before her eyes, the second Bullet Line extended. She kicked the ground with her right foot using all her strength and jumped, her body dancing in the air. A laser passed right by her abdomen, and for a moment her vision went white.

The third Bullet Line crossed slightly above Sinon's jumping path. She shrunk her head as much as possible to avoid the incoming heat ray, but the tip of her thin blue short-cut hair was slightly touched by the ray; with a cracking sound, light particles dispersed.

Somehow managing to avoid the continuous Laser Blaster fire, Sinon landed on the ground, in front of her eyes—

A horribly thick, about 50 cm diameter blood colored line bathed her.

No mistake, this is the Minigun's Bullet Line. A few tenths of second later, that storm like burst attack would come.

Sinon whipped her body that was paralyzed by fear, bent her right foot that just touched ground, and again jumped with all her strength. She turned her body in the air, at the top of the high jump her body was laying flat.

Right after, a gale of energy waves passed by, barely below her back, where she felt its turbulence. After the cluster of shining white live ammo passed by her view, another part of the broken wall of the ruined building a little distance away was blown apart.

Just before her back landed on the sandy ground, she turned her body again, landing on hands and legs. At the same time she threw her body forward as hard as she could. After rolling several times, she reached the shadow of the concrete wall where Dyne's group was hiding.

The squadron leader stared with consternation at Sinon who suddenly appeared in front of him. No matter if this looked like good intentions, his eyes did not shine with gratitude, just doubt for someone who stuck her head in a deadly place on purpose.

Dyne soon turned his face, looking at the assault rifle in his hands. His muttered voice, sounded low.

"...Those bastards, they called a bodyguard."

"Bodyguard?"

"You do not know? He's that Minigun user. He is called «Behemoth», a brainy muscular guy that is based in the north continent. He is hired as protection-like things by squadrons with money but no perseverance."

That is a way more respectable play style than yours, Sinon thought, but of course didn't say it. Instead, she turned to look at the three attackers beyond Dyne, who stuck their heads once in a while out of cover to fire blankly at the enemy group. She said in a volume that barely reached their whole group.

"If we continue hiding like this we will be wiped out soon. —The Minigun's remaining bullets are a bit dubious. If everyone attacks at the same time, he will just mow us down without any concern. We have to eliminate that option. The two with SMG go left, Dyne and I will go around right side, M4 stay here for backup..."

Saying up to here, Dyne interrupted with his husky voice.

"...It won't work, there are three Blaster users left. If we rush in, the defense shield effect will..."

"Blaster continuous fire rate is slower than live ammo guns, we can avoid half."

"Impossible!"

Dyne repeated stubbornly and shook his head.

"Rushing in will get you blown away by the Minigun anyway. ...Although it is regrettable, let's give up. If you are too proud to see them win, then logout here...."

Even if you logout in a neutral field, you won't disappear immediately. Your avatar without soul will stay there for a few minutes, vulnerable to being attacked. The probability is low, but weapon or armor random drop could happen.

Thus far, she thought that the leader's retreat timing was way too early, but with this kind of desperation, not mentioning a child's temper, she had never thought he would make that kind of proposal. Sinon stared while half dumbfounded at Dyne's supposedly veteran soldier's face.

At the moment, Dyne showed his teeth and shouted.

"What, don't take the game so seriously! Either way is the same, even if we rush we will die in vain..."

"Then die!"

On reaction, Sinon shouted her reply.

"At least in the game, try to die facing gunpoint!"

Really, why should she say that kind of thing to a man that's just a target. Before that, it meant she would be cutting ties with this squadron.

While part of her heart was thinking that, she took Dyne's camouflage jacket collar and forcefully pulled it. At the same time, she quickly said to the remaining wide eyed three.

"Three seconds will be fine, get the Minigun's attention, I will finish him with Hecate."

"...Un, understood."

The man with goggles on his green hair struggled for a long time then finally responded, and the remaining two team members nodded.

"Ok, we will split in two, left and right go at same time."

Sinon pushed the sulking Dyne's hip, and they moved to the shelter's end point. She took her sidearm MP7 from her left waist, and started a countdown with hand sign.

Three... two... one,

"GO!!!"

At the same time, she kicked the ground hard and entered one second ahead, the battlefield where continuous death awaited.

At that moment, a few Bullet Lines appeared in front of her. She lowered her body, while sliding to avoid them, the enemy group entered her field of view.

In front to the right, behind a wall about twenty meters ahead, were two people with Laser Blasters. A bit to the left was another. The Minigun man «Behemoth» was in the center about ten meters behind them, he was aiming for her teammates that went out from the left.

While Sinon was running to the right, she aimed the MP7 in her left hand at the Blaster users. Pressing the trigger slightly made a Bullet Circle show up. There was no way she could control her heart rate, which caused the Circle to pulse around the men's bodies.

Even so she fired. She felt the recoil shock that was nothing compared to Hecate II in her palm, and she emptied the 20 round magazine of 4.6mm bullets in one go.

The reckless counterattack made them panic, and the two Blaster users tried to hide behind the wall, but a few bullets still hit their bodies. It was not enough to drop their HP to zero, but it would buy her a few seconds of time.

"Dyne! Support me!"

Sinon shouted and threw herself on the ground, at the same time removing Hecate II from her back and holding it in her two hands. She didn't have time to extend its two leg stand. Enduring its terrible weight, she peered through the scope.

As it was still set on low magnification, she could see all of Behemoth's upper body. That face instantly turned to look her way, Sinon pulled the trigger without waiting for the Bullet Circle to shrink.

A roar and certain kill flash tore through the space— it passed by right next to Behemoth's head. The attack blew away the goggles from Behemoth's head, turning into powder and disappearing.

She had missed—!

Sinon bit her lips and was going to stand up, then her vision in the scope crossed with Behemoth. Behemoth who exposed his real face, his two grey eyes were blazing with light, his lips had another fearless smile on it.

Sinon's whole body was covered by a huge red light.

Impossible to avoid, she instantly came to the conclusion. From her prostrated firing position, getting up and jumping left or right, there's no time for that.

At least, face the gun muzzle—

Follow her own words, Sinon stood up and looked straight at Behemoth. Suddenly, a few places in that huge body, "Papaa!" sound with light burst.

It was Dyne. While kneeling with one leg on the ground and holding his assault rifle, he fired with high accuracy. In this situation, at this distance, the fact that he can score so many hits means no matter what his personality was, his skills were amazing, while thinking that Sinon jumped with all her might to her right side. Right after, the place she had just been was cut with tens of rounds of bullet storm.

"Dyne! Move to the right more...."

At that point in her shout.

The two Laser Blaster users again appeared from their cover, aiming at the standing Dyne and firing without mercy arrows of light.

The range was way too close. The heat rays passed through Dyne's defense field and hit his body one after another.

Dyne looked at Sinon for an instant. Then he faced forward—

"Uooo!!"

With that single cry, he started running straight forward.

A rain of light bullets attacked Dyne. He dodged, slipped through, while fiercely dashing. But of course, he couldn't avoid all the shots.

The last few seconds, Dyne pulled the protection talisman replacement Plasma Grenade from his waist and threw it at their cover. At the same time his HP was all gone. While his avatar was still facing away from Sinon, he broke into numerous polygon pieces and scattered away.

Subsequently, the world was dyed in white flash.

A giant hammer of God impacted the ground. Green white energy flow went crazy, a huge dust storm went up. Mixed in that, a Blaster user's body flowed in the air, before it reached ground, it was smashed and annihilated.

—Nice Guts!

She gave a short elegy to Dyne who exited the battle, then squinting her eyes from the dust and quickly checked the battle field.

One of her two teammates who took the left wing seem to have been killed by the Minigun, and the Blaster user over there seem to have disappeared.

The right wing, due to Dyne's self-destruction, was a mess. He took one enemy attacker with him and the one left over should be stunned.

Then— within the gradually dispersing dust, a huge silhouette approached her in a straight line.

If this continued, it would be Behemoth and her fighting face-to-face. But at that distance, her sniper rifle couldn't win against the heavy machine gun.

She had to find a way to enter the Minigun's blind spot while she was in a position to fire. But in one-on-one front fighting, there's no blind spot...

—No.

Sinon held her breath for a moment. While the dust that covered everything caused by Dyne's grenade was still here, Behemoth couldn't tell exactly where she was. Of course she couldn't snipe since she couldn't see him clearly either, but maybe she could go to the one place in this area where that bullet storm couldn't reach.

While thinking that, she turned around and fiercely dashed out. She headed for the broken and fallen building ruin at the rear of the battlefield.

Jumping through the entrance, she couldn't see that the rear of the building had collapsed and the yellow sky was visible, but she aimed for the right hand wall— there were stairs going up. While trying not to step on the broken tiles and make a noise, she ran carefully.

On the metal staircase, she should have stepped lightly, but she went up without bothering. She kicked the wall like a dancer to change her direction and went farther up.

She reached the fifth floor, where the stairs ended, in less than twenty seconds. There was a huge window on the left.

From here, she should have a few seconds to take a sniping position without Behemoth noticing.

While thinking that, Sinon placed the Hecate II against her shoulder and looked out the window down at the battle field.

Suddenly her vision was painted red.

A few tens of meters below, Behemoth raised his Minigun to the maximum height and aimed straight at Sinon. He had read her. Her thought and battle plan, everything.

She had no time to retreat or lay down.

So strong. He was a real GGO player, no, a soldier.

However, this opponent was exactly the enemy that Sinon wished to fight. Kill him. Have to kill him.

She didn't hesitate. Without taking a sniping position, she put her right foot on the window sill and jumped right out.

At the same time, like a burning flame, a flash of energy wave came rushing up from the ground. Whack!! Intense shock came from below Sinon's left knee. Her avatar's leg was blown away, and her HP bar went down a lot.

However, she was still alive. She flew past the Minigun's line of fire and danced in space. She was directly above Behemoth's imposing stance.

He probably wanted to shoot till he ran out of bullets, so he backed up, trying to keep Sinon in his firing line. But he couldn't reach her. For a Minigun that was hung on a rail on his back, there's no way it could aim directly above.

While falling, Sinon held Hecate II against her shoulder and peered through the scope.



Her view was full of Behemoth's rough face. In that face, the usual smile disappeared. He showed his teeth, with surprise and anger burning lantern in his eyes.

Sinon barely noticed that her own mouth moved.

What appeared was a smile. Savage, cruel, cold-hearted smile.

While falling, she was not stable enough to shoot far, but the distance was way too close. When her gun muzzle was about one meter from Behemoth's head, her green Bullet Circle shrunk, and fixed on the center of the man's face.

"The End!"

While whispering, she pulled the trigger.

From the finger of the Goddess of the underworld, in this world, the largest energy spear from one bullet was released.

That instantly pierced a huge hole through Behemoth's face and upper body, going deep into the rubble ground.

Subsequently, after the explosive roaring sound passed, Behemoth's huge cylindrical body disassembled and scattered.

Chapter 4

The moment she stepped through the school gates, a dry and chill wind blew against her face.

Asada Shino paused, tightly re-wrapping her white muffler.

Wearing cell-frame glasses, with more than half her face hidden in the fabric of the muffler, she once again started walking. She continued at a brisk pace on the sidewalk covered by autumn leaves, heaving a small sigh from deep within her chest.

...Now, out of the total 608 days for 3 years worth of high school, 156 days have passed.

A quarter at last. With that thought, she was staggered by the asceticism that was imposed on her for much too long. However, if she were to add in middle school, then already 60 percent of the days had faded away into the past. It will end, someday... it will end, someday. She repeated those words in her mind like a mantra.

Of course, although graduation day was approaching, it wasn't as if she had something she wanted to do or someone she wanted to become. Simply, her current self was in the middle of being forced to belong; she wanted to be free from the group known as «high school students».

Attending that asylum-like place day by day, listening to the lectures of lethargic teachers, exercising and doing other things alongside a bunch of people whom she doubted had changed in even a single way since childhood. What kind of meaning was there in doing any of that? Shino really could not understand. In very exceptional circumstances, there were also teachers who gave lessons which she found meaningful, and there were also students who should be respected. But to Shino, none of their existences were essential.

Shino had once told her grandparents, now her legal guardians, that she wanted to work immediately or train for employment at a vocational school, rather than go to high school. Her old-fashioned grandfather had turned red with anger, while her grandmother had cried, saying that she wanted Shino to properly go to a good school and marry into a good family, otherwise she wouldn't be able to stand apologizing to Shino's father. She had little choice but to study desperately, getting admitted into a fairly well-known metropolitan high school in Tokyo, but she was surprised when

she entered and got a look. There was essentially no change at all from the public middle school in her hometown.

In the end Shino, just as she had in middle school, routinely counted the remaining days as she journeyed out of the school gates each day.

Shino lived alone in an apartment located halfway between the school and the JR train station. Although it was only the size of six tatami mats^[15], no larger than a small household kitchen, it was nice and conveniently situated right next to the shopping district.

The shopping district at half-past three in the afternoon still did not have many people in sight.

First, Shino browsed through the shelf display of the bookstore. Though she found a new book from her favorite author, she held back because it was a hard cover copy and left the store. If she reserved it online, in about a month she could borrow it from the municipal library.

Next, she went to the stationery store to buy an eraser and a grid-ruled notebook. After checking the remaining amount in her purse, she headed to the supermarket located in the middle of the shopping district while thinking about the menu for dinner. Naturally, Shino's dinners were simple and basic meals. As long as the balance of nutrition, calories, and cost were met, taste and appearance were of secondary importance.

While thinking of making carrot and celery soup along with a tofu hamburger, she passed the front of the game center next to the supermarket she was about to enter.

"Asada~—"

In the space between the two shops, a voice called out to Shino from the narrow alley.

Recoiling reflexively, Shino slowly turned 90 degrees to her right.

Three female students, dressed in uniforms identical to Shino's —except with a significant difference in skirt length— stood in the alley. One of them was squatting down and manipulating her cell phone. The other two were leaning against the wall of the supermarket, smiling while watching Shino.

While Shino remained silent, one of them who was standing made an arrogant gesture, jerking with her chin.

"Come over here."

But Shino did not move, asking in a small voice.

"...What?"

At that moment, another one of them approached and, without hesitation, grabbed Shino's right wrist.

"Whatever, just come."

With that, she was pulled before she could even respond.

Shino was shoved in the direction of the alley and out of sight of the shopping district, and the squatting student looked up at her. The leader of the three was a girl named Endou. Her eyes, suspended by black eyeliner, and her pointed chin gave off the impression of some sort of predatory insect.

Contorting her glittered lips into a smile, Endou spoke.

"Sorry, Asada. We just sang so much karaoke, and now we have no money to ride the train home. We'll pay you back tomorrow, so lend us some just for now."

She put up a finger. She meant not a hundred, not a thousand, but ten thousand yen.

They sang and sang but it wasn't even twenty minutes since the end of the class, all three of them even had cards for the regular train fare, and, furthermore, why take as much as ten thousand yen just for the train fare? With that, Shino had listed the logical discrepancies in her mind in quick succession, but would not voice her thoughts.

It was the second time these three had bluntly requested money from her. Last time, she had refused by saying that she did not have any.

While considering that playing the same hand would have a very low chance of success, Shino replied.

"There's no way I would have so much."

Endou's smile disappeared for a moment, and then reappeared.

"Then, go withdraw some more."

"..."

Shino silently walked toward the shopping district.. They probably wouldn't follow her to the bank where other people could see anyway. Who would honestly be stupid enough to do something like coming back if you could just leave— as she thought that, Endou's words continued.

"The bag, leave it here. Your purse, too. As long as you have your card it's okay, right?"

Shino stopped and turned around. Though Endou's lips didn't change from the shape of a smile, those two narrow eyes lit up— like an excited cat toying with its prey.

These three people, she had once believed them to be her friends. When she remembered that, Shino could not forgive her own folly.

In moving away from the countryside, she had left behind everyone she once knew. And after entering high school, Shino had nothing in common with her classmates, having no shared interest to talk about, and so remained silent everyday. Endou and her friends were the first to reach out to her.

After they invited her to eat lunch with them, the four of them eventually stopped at fast food restaurants on the way home from school. Shino mostly just listened to their conversations. Even though she secretly couldn't stand what they talked about at times, she was still happy. Endou and company were her first friends in a long time who were unaware of «that incident». She had believed, if it was at this school, she could become a normal student..

Shino did not learn the truth until much later. The three had only approached her after seeing her address on the class register and guessing that she lived alone.

'Can we go to your house to play?' When they asked her that, Shino had immediately agreed. Her apartment had been praised and admired by Endou and her friends, surrounded by snacks and chatting until it was dark.

The next day, and even the days after that, they came to Shino's apartment.

Before long, the three of them used Shino's room to change into casual clothing, then ride the train to go play. One day, they left their belongings at Shino's room and, from that day on, the clothes of the three began to occupy her small closet.

Shoes. Bags. Cosmetics. Endou and her friends' personal belongings began to increase more and more. By the start of May, the three of them would go out to play and return drunk, and then even stay overnight just like that.

Finally, at some point, Shino had timidly complained that if they came here too often, she would be troubled if she couldn't study.

Endou simply responded, "We're friends right?" And the next day, they requested a spare key.

Then, it was on that Saturday in late May.

While Shino was standing in front of her door after coming home from the library, she heard loud laughing voices echoing from inside her room. It was not just the voices of Endou and her friends.

Shino held her breath to listen carefully. The thought of checking her own room was absurd, an act she did not want to do.

Clearly, she heard the laughter of several men.

In her own room, there were men she did not know. With such a thought, Shino cowered in fear. It was followed by a burst of anger. She had finally realized the truth.

She walked down the stairs of the apartment, using her cell phone to call the police. Though the police officer that came seemed to be perplexed by the stories told by both parties, Shino had intently repeated, "I don't know them."

"For the time being we'll go to the police station," the police officer told Endou, who then shot a terrible look at Shino.

"Hmph, I see." Endou responded, packed up her stuff, and left the room.

Retaliation came quickly.

Using devil-like investigative abilities, unheard of for their usual group, Endou had looked up the reason Shino lived by herself: five years ago in a

far away prefecture, she was involved in the «incident» that has almost been forgotten even on the net. Her past was exposed to the whole school. The students willing to talk to Shino disappeared completely, and even the teachers avoided looking directly at her.

Everything returned to the same as it was back in middle school.

But Shino thought that would be fine.

Her weakness of wanting a friend had clouded her eyes. There is no one who can save you but yourself. She has no choice but to get stronger through her own power, to overcome the wounds left by that incident. In order to do that, friends were not needed. Rather, enemies were fine. Enemies to fight— everything around her, enemies.

After a gulp, Shino took a deep breath, and looked straight into Endou's eyes.

A dangerous light dwelled in those two narrow eyes. This time the smile disappeared completely. Endou spoke in a low voice.

"What? Hurry up and go already."

"I don't want to."

"...Huh?"

"I don't want to. I have no intention of lending you any money."

Without averting her gaze, Shino replied.

Such a firm rejection would provoke even more hostility and malice. Despite knowing this, Shino would not follow their request. To follow their request was to run away and betray a weak resolve, something she didn't want to do. Not because it was Endou, but because she did not want to show herself «a weak self». To become strong, she spent the last five years thinking like this. If she yielded here, then those efforts would have been in vain.

"You bitch... Don't you dare look down on me."

With her right eye twitching, Endou took a step forward. The other two girls quickly circled behind Shino, surrounding her from a close range.

"—I'm leaving now, so move aside."

Shino said in a low voice. No matter how much they threatened her, Endou did not have the guts to take real action. These girls were just normal, good children when at home. They should have learned from before not to make it into a police issue.

But.

Endou was very familiar with Shino's weak point— the one spot Shino couldn't defend.

The fancy color on her lips shined as a mocking smile grew.

Endou slowly raised her right fist and pointed it toward the bridge of Shino's glasses. She extended her thumb and index finger from her fist, forming a child's imitation of a handgun. A silly, childish caricature.

However, with only that, Shino's whole body was enveloped by a chilling sensation.

She gradually lost strength in both of her legs. Her balance felt distant. In her eyes, the alley began to lose its color in contrast to Endou's finger before her. Shino could not take her eyes off the index finger's long nail with a glossy shine. Her heartbeat quickened, a high-frequency sound rang in her ears, increasing in pitch rapidly...

"Bang!"

Endou suddenly called out. Almost simultaneously, Shino let out a blood-curdling scream. She could not stop the trembling coming from the core of her body.

"Pfft..., hey, Asada~"

While her fingertip was still extended, Endou spoke in a voice mixed with laughter.

"So my older bro has a number of those model guns. Next time, I'll show it to you at school. You like them right, pistols."

"..."

Her tongue could not move. In her dry mouth, it just quivered in a troubled way.

Shino shook her head with a small stutter. If a real model gun was suddenly shown to her in school, she was likely to faint right there. Simply

by imagining that scene, her stomach began to shrink, and her body could not help but bend down.

"Hey hey, don't puke Asada~—"

Behind her, there were still voices mixed with laughter.

"But when you puke and collapse in the middle of world history class, it'll be super tough afterwards."

"Well, if it's here, then there are drunken old men puking quite often."

Louder laughter burst out.

I want to escape. I wish I could run away. But I can't do it. The two opposing thoughts echoed loudly inside her mind.

"For the time being, we'll let you off with what you have on you now, Asada. You look sick, anyway."

Endou reached out to the bag held by Shino's right hand, Shino really could not resist. 'Don't think about it, don't remember it.' While thinking that, the vision of her memory revived in a black brilliance. The heavy, wet feel of iron. The smell of gunpowder inside the nose—

At that time, a shout sounded from behind her.

"This way! Mr. Patrolman, hurry!!"

A young man's voice.

Endou's hand moved quickly away from her bag. The three people ran out the front with amazing speed, mixing into the crowd of people in the shopping district.

This time her legs really lost strength, and Shino collapsed onto her knees, crouching.

She desperately tried to control her breathing, trying to keep herself from panicking. Slowly, the shoppers noisy conversation and the super market's grilled chicken smell came back and her nightmarish flashback faded away.

How many tens of seconds had she been in that state? Then, from behind, came a timid voice.

"...Are you okay, Asada-san?

Taking one last deep breath, Shino gathered strength in her weakened legs and stood up.

She adjusted her glasses while turning around, and saw a small skinny boy.

He wore jeans and a nylon pullover, with a dark green backpack over his shoulders. Along with his casual clothes, a black baseball cap sat over his little round face. Although he looked like a middle school student, the dark shadows beneath his eyes betrayed his youthful visage.

Shino knew this boy's name. He was the only one in this town she could trust— or at least wasn't an enemy. In another world they have a good relationship like comrades.

Feeling her heartbeat finally settle down, Shino gave him a small smile and replied.

"...I am all right. Thank you, Shinkawa-kun— Where are the police?"

She looked at the back of the alley; it was dark and empty, and no one seemed to be appearing.

Shinkawa Kyouji scratched his head through his cap and smiled.

"It was a bluff. It happens a lot in movies and manga right? I wanted to try it once. I'm glad it worked."

"..."

Shino was somewhat amazed, and gently shook her head.

"...You always come up with these kinds of tricks in a flash— Why are you here?"

"Ah, I was at the game center over there. I came out the back door..."

Kyouji looked behind him. On the rain soaked concrete wall near the road, she really could see a small silver door.

"Those guys surrounded Asada-san. I really thought of dialing 110^[16]..."



"Yes, you were a great help. Thank you."

Shino smiled again, Kyouji also smiled for a moment, then returned to a worried look.

"...Asada-san, this kind of thing...does it happen a lot? That...even if it's me saying it, you should report this to the school..."

"It won't help, even if I do that. It's okay, if they go any further than this, I will really go to the police station. Then again, before worrying about other people, are you... all right?"

"Ah...I'm fine. I have not met those guys again."

The small boy, this time gave a self-delusional sort of smile.

Shinkawa Kyouji was Shino's classmate before the summer holidays.

"Was," as he hadn't come to school since the second school semester.

From the rumors she'd heard, Kyouji was severely bullied by the seniors in his soccer club. His physique was small and his family owned a large hospital, which made him look like the perfect target. They didn't ask him for money outright like Endou's group did, but he paid for their food, entertainment and other sorts of stupid stuff, damaging his self-esteem in the process.

Naturally, she had never heard about this directly from Kyouji.

They first got to know each other in June, in the nearby municipal library.

Shino was in the second floor reading room, reading *The World's Firearms*. She had finished most of the graphic magazine.

At the time, she was finally able to look at such pictures without panicking, but looking at the page with «that gun» for around ten seconds was her limit. Right when she hurriedly closed the book, a voice came from behind

'...Do you like guns?'

That the person who had said that was her classmate was something she didn't realize until later.

Shino had wanted to immediately answer, 'No way, it's the opposite'. However, then he would question why she was reading the magazine. It would be hard for her to offer a rational response, so she had just answered vaguely.

Now, Kyouji knew that Shino had an extreme fear of guns in the real world, but back then he misunderstood Shino's response. So, he smiled happily and sat in the chair next to her.

He pointed at the graphic magazine and talked about the firearms pictured, while Shino listened with cold sweat flowing within her. But among all that, Kyouji mentioned a «different world».

She knew that Full Dive game machines went on sale a few years ago, and she also knew about the term VRMMO. However, Shino had grown up without playing games, and believed that it was enough for «A World of Swords and Magic» to exist only in fantasy books. She wasn't interested in it.

But the virtual world Kyouji intimately described in a dreamlike way didn't have any swords or magic. In exchange— it had guns.

That world's name was «Gun Gale Online» (GGO). The many firearms that exist, or have existed, in real life were precisely reproduced in that world, and the players use those weapons to kill each other in a gruesome wasteland.

Shino interrupted Kyouji, asking him with a sigh.

"—In the game...does this gun exist?"

The boy blinked in surprise, then nodded in an of course fashion.

If it's like that, Shino started thinking. In that virtual world, can she confront «that gun» again? Five years ago, her eleven year old heart was deeply pierced; that black gun left a bullet wound which would never disappear. Can she face that black gun once more; fight it; overcome it?

Shino firmly held her cold, sweat-soaked hands and, in cool voice, asked Kyouji, "To start playing this game, how much money is required?"

Half a year had passed.

Inside Shino was born a girl named «Sinon», a ruthless sniper who became famous in the wasteland of GGO.

But, unfortunately, she still has not met an enemy with «that gun». So Shino does not know. Has her real self —not Sinon, but Asada Shino— really become strong, or not...?

The answer still eludes her.

"...Hey, would you like a drink? My treat."

Kyouji's voice pulled Shino out of her deep thoughts. Looking up, she found the sun shining into the narrow alley had already begun to redden.

"...Really?"

Shino smiled, then Kyouji happily nodded.

"I want to hear about your recent rampaging story. In this alley, there's a quiet tea shop."

A few minutes later, sitting in a seat deep within the shop she was led to, holding her hands around a cup of nice, fragrant milk tea, she finally relaxed a bit. Endou will probably continue to find ways to bully her. Well, what will happen will happen, she thought, pushing those thoughts to a corner of her mind.

"I heard, the day before yesterday. You had a big success right?"

She looked up at Kyouji's voice. The skinny boy was poking at the half ball of vanilla ice-cream floating on top of his ice coffee with a spoon, looking at her with upturned eyes.

"...That's not true. The battle plan was a failure. In our squadron of six, four were killed. For an ambush that turned into a firefight, the result can't be called a win."

She replied with a shrug. Thinking of actual firearms in the real world could easily push her into panic, but recently, while talking about things inside GGO, she had managed to stay calm. It is like the virtual world was having a rehabilitation effect.

"Still, it's amazing. That Minigun user «Behemoth» has never died in a group battle before this, I heard."

"Oh...is he that famous? I didn't see him in the «Bullet of Bullets» ranking, so I didn't know about him."

"There's a reason for that. No matter how strong the Minigun is said to be, carrying 500 rounds of ammo puts him overweight, so he can't run anymore. «BoB» is a solo encounter fight. If he gets sniped from long

distances, it will be over. However if he has adequate support in a group battle, he's invincible. That weapon is against the rules."

Seeing Kyouji complain like that with a pout, Shino could not help smiling.

"...Then, my Hecate II would really be against the rules. After using it, I have to face a variety of troubles, too. That Behemoth-san is probably thinking the same thing, too."

"Geesh, that's luxurious trouble...So, what are your plans for the next BoB?"

"I will enter, of course. I have almost all of the previous top 20 ranked people's data collected. This time I plan to bring Hecate. This time, I will..."

Kill, she was going to say, then hurriedly covered up with:

"...Try to reach the upper ranks."

Shino/Sinon participated in the GGO ranking tournament two months ago, named «Bullet of Bullets». Thirty people who passed the preliminaries entered the main tournament, a battle royal, vying to be the strongest. Despite her efforts, Sinon finished as rank 22nd.

As the thirty participants are randomly placed in a wide map at the start of BoB, there is a chance that you can be instantly forced into close range combat. So, she had used an assault rifle instead of the sniper rifle Hecate II. But during close combat, she was killed by a sniper with a «Remington M40» from afar.

Two months later, even if the gun was still hard to manage, she had gained experience with Hecate and gotten used to it. She also obtained a rare light sub-machine gun «MP7», so she could handle close combat more effectively. She will bring the huge rifle to enter the upcoming third BoB, she thought. Basically, she will hide behind cover—even if said to be unfair—waiting for a target to enter her view, and then blow them all away without leaving even one remaining.

In this GGO, filled with powerful warriors, she will kill all her enemies. And when she can be sure that she is the strongest—at that time, for sure...

Kyouji's regretful voice in her ear pulled Shino away from her dark thoughts.

"I see..."

Shino blinked and looked at Kyouji, who was looking at her with somewhat shining eyes.

"Asada-san is amazing. You obtained that incredible gun... and your stats are like those guys with STR builds. I invited you to GGO, but you already left me far behind."

"...That's not true. Shinkawa-san got to the semifinals in the previous preliminary tournament too. That fight was mostly luck. What a pity. If you had reached the finals, then you would have been able to enter the main tournament."

"No... I can't. With an AGI build, without some extremely good luck with rare drops, this is as good as I'll get. My stats placement was a mistake..."

While listening to Kyouji's complaint, she frowned.

The other Kyouji, a character named «Spiegel», followed the AGI route, which focused on increasing the dexterity parameter and was popular early on.

This type of character used its overwhelming evasion and firing speed—in this case, rapid fire isn't the gun's actual firing speed, but the time needed to aim and for the Bullet Circle to steady—to destroy other character types. AGI builds held the advantage for half a year since the start of GGO. However, as new maps were conquered, they lacked the STR, the strength to equip the new weapons that became available, or the guns themselves became more accurate so evasion became less effective. Now, eight months after the beginning of service, AGI builds could not be called the main trend any longer.

Even so, if AGI types managed to obtain rare, large caliber rifles specialized in firing speed, for example the «FN FAL» or «H&K G3», they could still do well as they are. The previous BoB 2nd rank player called «Yamikaze» was an AGI build—that said, he was beaten by the winner «Zekushiido», a balanced STR-VIT build.

However—

For Shino, stats and type related things were just «Character Strength». There was a more important factor which solemnly existed.

That is, a player's own strength; their strength of heart. In her fight the day before yesterday, «Behemoth» usually had a calm composure when he

moved, and above that he had the luxury to put on a half smile. The source of that man's strength wasn't his M134 Minigun, but his ferocious smile.

That's why Shino couldn't fully accept the way Kyouji said things were.

"Yes... That rare gun is very strong, although... There are strong people with rare guns, but not everyone with a rare gun is strong. Actually, about half of the thirty people who entered the previous tournament only used customized guns bought in shops."

"That is... Since Asada-san has that super rare gun, and above that you are a balanced STR build, that's why you can say that. There really is a large gap in weapon quality..."

While watching Kyouji sigh and stir his coffee float, Shino realized that saying anymore would be useless, so she tried to end the topic.

"Then, Shinkawa-kun won't be entering the next BoB?"

"...No. Even if I enter, it would be useless."

"I see... Well... you have studies too. You are going to the Prep school's big test right? How were your mock exam results?"

Kyouji hadn't gone to school since summer vacation, and it seemed he had considerable argument with his father over that incident.

His father runs a relatively large hospital, and so the second son Kyouji who was to succeed the family name had been strictly ordered to prepare for the medical department exams. The result of a very tense family meeting was that they would allow him to study at home, but in the year after the next, he must participate in university entrance qualification examinations in order to enter the famous university's medical department where his father graduated from without losing any time. That was their promise, as Shino had heard from him in the past.

"Ah... Yes."

Kyouji nodded and smiled.

"I am fine, I'm maintaining the rank I had while going to school. No problem, Ms. Instructor."

"Good."

Shino jokingly replied, also with a smile.

"Shinkawa-kun's login time is incredible. I was a little worried. Whenever I went in you were always online."

"I study during the day time. Variation is very important."

"Since you spend so much time playing, you must make a lot of money—?"

"...That's not true. It's almost impossible for AGI builds to solo hunt now..."

Since the conversation mood became strange again, Shino hurriedly said.

"Well, making enough for the connection fee is fine...Sorry, I need to go home soon."

"Ah, I see. Asada-san makes her own dinner right? I would like to eat your food again, if possible."

"Ah, ye, yea, sure. Before that... I need to improve my cooking a little."

Shino started panicking again.

Just once, she had invited Kyouji to her home for dinner. Eating the meal itself was fun, but afterward when they were facing each other drinking tea, she felt Kyouji's stare grow more intense, and she had a cold sweat. Even though he was an ultra net gamer and gun maniac, a man was still a man. In retrospect, she decided that inviting him to her single person home was a bit careless.

She did not hate him. Chatting with him was one of the few ways for her to relax in the real world. However, at the moment, she didn't want to consider anything beyond their current relationship. Not until she can destroy the darkness deep within her heart, triumphing over that memory.

"Thank you for your hospitality. Also... really thank you for saving me. You were very cool."

Shino said while getting up. Kyouji was all smiles while he scratched his head.

"If I can always protect you that would be nice. That is... well, when you return from school... can I go pick you up?"

"N, no, it's fine. I also need to become strong."

After hearing Shino's laughing reply, Kyouji's eyes shone once more and his puppy dog eyes disappeared.

Shino climbed the concrete staircase, tinged slightly black after soaking in years of rain.

The second door was the apartment house where Shino lived alone. She took a key from her skirt pocket and inserted it into the old electronic lock. After entering a 4-digit code in the small panel, she turned her key, and heard a metallic click.

She entered the slightly dark entrance way and closed the door with a hand behind her back.

She turned the deadbolt, and after confirming it was locked, she silently let out, "I'm home." Of course, no one answered her.

From the entrance area, a narrow, long space extended about 3 meters. The right side was the apartment's bathroom door; on the left side was a small kitchen.

She put the vegetables, tofu, and other things she bought from the supermarket into the refrigerator next to the sink, then she walked deep into the six tatami room, where she breathed a sigh of relief. As the last rays of sunlight shone through the curtains, she touched a wall switch to turn on the lights.

The room was nothing to be proud of. The floor was covered with vinyl tiles, and the curtains were a plain ivory color. Before the right-hand wall was a black pipe bed, further down on the same side was a similar dull, black colored writing desk, and against the opposite wall was a small chest and a bookshelf, in line. A full length mirror beside them was the main piece of furniture.

She put her school bag on the floor and removed her white muffler. Taking off her coat, she placed it and her muffler on a hanger, and put them into a small closet. She pulled the glossy, dark green scarf from her almost black colored sailor uniform, but while her left hand was pulling down the zipper, she stopped and looked at the writing desk.

After school today had been somewhat troublesome, but she managed to face Endou's threats, so a little bit of confidence remained deep in her heart. True, she did fall into panic, but even so she stood her ground without running away.

And two days ago, inside GGO, she won a death match against the strongest enemy she had ever seen. She felt that her heart was forged in a remarkably strong fire.

Shinkawa Kyouji told her that Behemoth guy was invincible in a party fight. She felt that legend wasn't exaggerated, as that man had released incredible pressure. During the fight, Shino/Sinon had resigned herself to defeat and death— however in the end, she had managed to obtain victory through her own strength.

Perhaps...

Perhaps, now, she would be able to face that memory, and force it to yield.

While not moving, Shino continued to stare at the desk drawer.

Tens of seconds later, she threw the scarf, still in her right hand, on the bed and quickly walked to the desk.

She took a few deep breaths to chase away the fear creeping up her spine.

She put her fingers on the third drawer's handle and slowly pulled it open.

Inside were small boxes for organizing writing utensils and other related items. As she kept pulling the drawer out, what was behind the boxes was slowly exposed. As the box line ends, «that» shape appeared. Shining, dull black, was a small— toy.

It was a plastic model gun. But the make was very detailed, the tiny hairlines running on the surface gave the toy a metallic look.

She fought to calm her beating heart upon seeing that shape, and stretched out her right hand. Her trembling right hand touched the grip of the gun, held it, and then took it out. The profoundly heavy feedback. The freezing cold as if it sucked in all the cold air from the room.

This toy gun was not a model of any existing, real world firearm. The grip was shaped in an ergonomic curve, and above the large trigger guard was a high caliber gun barrel. It might be said to be a Bullpup^[17] style gun, with the dull machine part with heat vents placed somewhere behind and above the grip.

The gun's name was «Procyon SL», an optical gun in Gun Gale Online. Its category was a handgun, but it could fire in full automatic, so it was a popular sidearm for fights against monsters.

Although Shino has a storage room in Gurokken, this thing that the real Shino holds is not something she bought. It is not something that is sold in the market anyway.

It happened a few days after she entered the Bullet of Bullets tournament two months ago and lost with a rank of 22nd. Addressed to Shino's game account was an e-mail in English from «Zasker», GGO's operation company.

Though it took her some effort to interpret the contents, it seemed to be a BoB Participation Award. She could choose to receive in-game currency or items, or a Procyon SL model gun in the real world, was what it seemed to say.

Even if it was a toy, she couldn't stand receiving gun related items in the real world, so she initially decided to pick the in-game money. But then she thought of something.

In order to confirm the effect of her use of GGO as «drastic treatment», one day, she must touch a model gun in the real world. That said, for her to go buy a model gun in a toy shop would result in too much psychological conflict. If she asked Kyouji, he would probably happily lend her one, but she couldn't stand the thought of going into panic while accepting it. Buying one on the net was probably her best choice, but looking at various gun pictures in the net shop would weigh her down, so she could never actually buy one. And, of course, there would be the problem of money.

If the GGO operation company sent her the model gun for free, that might be the best way for her. So, after being indecisive up until near the deadline, she chose to accept the Participation Award in the real world.

A week later, the heavy International Postal Parcel (EMS) arrived.

It took her another two weeks to decide to open it.

However, her reaction to it at that time greatly betrayed her expectations. Shino had pushed it into the deepest part of her desk drawer and hid the memory in a corner of her mind.

And right now— Shino once again held Procyon in her hand.

The gun's cold air passed from her right palm to her arm, up to her shoulder, and seemed to seep deep into her body. It was only a resin model, but its weight felt tremendous. It should have been a handgun light enough to spin around with a finger, but she could only feel that it was a chain binding her to the floor.

The gun became warm, stealing the body heat from her palm. And in the cold and sweat soaked warmth, Shino felt another presence.

Who is that?

That is... that... man.

Her heart rate increased to a speed beyond her control. Cold blood coursed through her body, ringing loudly in her ears. She lost her sense of orientation. The floor under her feet tilted, losing solidity.

However, Shino could not remove her eyes from the gun's black shine. She stared at it as closely as if it would swallow her up.

There was a ringing in her ears. It became a high-pitched scream. It was a small girl's scream soaked with pure terror.

Who was the one screaming?

That was... me.

Shino did not know her father's face.

It didn't just mean she had no memory of her father in the real world. Just as the words said, Shino had not seen the person that was her father, not even in pictures or video.

When her father passed away due to a traffic accident, Shino was not even two years old.

That day, the family of three, her father, mother, and Shino, had been heading to her mother's parents' house to celebrate the new year. Their car had been driving near the northeast border of the prefecture, where an old, two lane road ran along a mountain side. Since they had left Tokyo late, it was around 11pm at night.

The cause of the accident was evidenced by the tire tracks at the scene: a truck coming from the opposite direction lost control of its steering on a curve in the road and crossed over into their lane.

The truck driver crashed through the front glass and hit the road, dying instantly.

Their small car was directly hit on the right side^[18], was knocked through the guardrail, and rolled down the side of the mountain, only stopping when their car hit a pair of trees. At the time, her father, the driver, was unconscious from serious injuries, but still alive, while her mother sitting beside her father had a fractured left leg. Baby Shino in the backseat was tightly belted down and sustained almost no injury. However, she doesn't have a single memory of that event.

Unfortunately, even the locals didn't use that road too often, especially late at night, so there wasn't a single car passing by. Also, due to the crash, their car's cell phone was broken.

By the time a driver on the old road noticed the accident and reported it the following morning, six hours had passed.

During that time, Shino's mother could only sit and watch while her father slowly became colder and eventually died from internal bleeding.

At that moment, somewhere deep within her mother's mind, something broke.

After the accident, her mother's mental state regressed to when she was a teenager and met Shino's father. Shino and her mother left Tokyo and went to live with her mother's parents. All her father's belongings, and any pictures and video containing him, were gotten rid of by her mother, and she never mentioned any of her memories.

Her mother wanted peace and quiet, so she started living like a country girl. What her mother saw Shino as, she couldn't be sure even 15 years after the accident; perhaps, she viewed Shino as her little sister. Even so, her mother still deeply loved Shino after the accident. She remembered her mother reading picture books and singing lullabies to her at night.

That's why, in Shino's memory, her mother was a frail girl who was hurt easily. Naturally, when she started to understand better, Shino thought that she had to become strong. She thought that she must protect her mother.

Once, when her grandparents were out, a very persistent salesman sat in the entrance, scaring her mother. So, the 9 year old Shino chased him away by telling him that if he did not leave, she would call the police.

For Shino, the outside world had many elements that threatened her mother's peaceful life. I have to protect her, have to protect her, that was her single-minded thought.

That's why— Shino thought back. That's why that incident happened. In a sense, it was inevitable. Shino kept trying to keep the outside world far away, and so that malicious world came for revenge.

Shino, the eleven year old, fifth grader in elementary school, didn't play outside often, usually opting to return home from school immediately and read books borrowed from the library. Her test scores were good, but she didn't have many friends. She was especially sensitive to external interference; there was an incident where a boy played a harmless trick by hiding her indoor shoes, so she hit him for real and gave him a bloody nose.

It happened on a Saturday afternoon, after the start of the second school semester.

Shino and her mother went to a nearby small post office^[19] together. There weren't any other customers.

While her mother filled out paperwork at a window, Shino sat on a bench, dangled her legs and read a book placed there for people waiting. She didn't remember the title.

Squeak, she heard the sound of the door, looked up and and saw a man enter. A skinny middle-aged man, wearing grayish clothing, one hand holding a Boston bag.

The man stopped at the entrance and looked around inside the office. His eyes met Shino's for an instant. She thought his eye color looked strange. In the center of his yellowed whites, dark pupils like deep holes moved rapidly. Thinking back now, his pupils were too dilated. It was uncovered later that the man, before he came to the post office, was injected with some stimulant.

But at that moment, Shino didn't have time to question it, as the man quickly moved to a window.

As Shino's mother was completing some sort of procedure at the «transfers & savings» window, the man suddenly grabbed her right arm with his left and pulled. He then threw her away violently. Her mother fell

without making a sound; the shock was so great that she froze with her eyes open.

Shino instantly stood up. She was going to loudly protest the sudden, unreasonable violence on her beloved mother.

Then, the man dropped his Boston bag on the counter loudly, and took out a black object from within. By the time Shino realized that it was a gun, the man had already pointed it at the male worker in the window. Pistol—Toy— No, real thing— Robbery—!? A few words flashed by in Shino's mind.

"Put the money in the bag!"

The man shouted in a hoarse voice. Then, he continued.

"Both hands on the counter top! Don't press the alarm button! You there, don't move!!"

Moving his gun left and right, he restrained several workers in the back.

She should immediately run out of the office and call for help outside, Shino thought. However she could not leave her mother lying on the ground and go.

While she hesitated, the man shouted again.

"Hurry and put the money inside!! All you have!! Hurry!!"

The male worker at the window, with his face stiff, held out a 5cm thick bundle of money in his right hand—

At that moment.

Her ears went numb. It took her some time to figure out it was from the loud, explosive sound. Next, ding, a small, metallic sound followed. Something had hit the wall and bounced, falling down around Shino's feet. A small, golden metallic tube.

When she raised her head again, she saw that on the other side of the counter, the male worker's eyes were round and both of his hands clutched his chest.. She could see that under his neck tie, his white shirt was dyed red. At that time, the worker on his chair leaned backward, along with a file cabinet near him, and fell to the ground.

"I told you not to press the button!!!"

The man's voice became high-pitched. She could see that his hand holding the gun was shaking. A smell reminiscent of fireworks reached her nose.

"Hey, you! Come here and take the money!!"

The man's gun pointed at two female workers who stood, frozen.

"Hurry and come!!"

The man's sharp voice rang out, but the female workers just shook their head and didn't move. They probably had training to counter robbery incidents, but actual bullets could not be blocked by training from any manual.

The man kicked the lower part of the counter many times in frustration. Maybe he was thinking of shooting another person, as he raised his right hand holding the gun, again. Screaming loudly, the female workers crouched down.

But then, the man did a half turn, and faced the customer side of the room.

"If you don't hurry, I'll shoot another person!! I'm going to shoot!!"

The man's gun was pointing at— Shino's mother who had fallen down on the floor and was looking into space with empty eyes.

The scene happening in front of her was too much for her. Her mother couldn't even move her body. Instantly, Shino thought:

—I need to protect my mother.

The thought that she continuously had since she was a little child, that willpower forced Shino's body into action.

Shino dropped her book and ran out, she held onto the man's right wrist holding the gun, and instantly bit down on it. The child's sharp teeth easily penetrated the man's skin.

"Whaa!?"

The man gave a surprised shout, then swung his right arm along with Shino. Shino's body hit the side of the counter. She lost two of her baby teeth at that moment, but she didn't feel it. In front of her eyes, that man's black gun slipped and fell from his hand. She picked it up while he was preoccupied.

It was heavy.

The heavy weight of the metal was felt through both of her hands. In contrast, the lined grip held by the man earlier was soaked with his sweat, with the man's body heat. It felt like a living thing.

Shino as a child knew a bit about what the tool was for. If she used this, she could stop the terrible man. Led by those thoughts, Shino held the gun up near level with her eyes, both hands' index fingers went to the trigger, and pointed it at the man.

At that moment, the man let out a strange sound and jumped at Shino, trying to get the gun away from her hands. His two hands latched onto her two wrists.

That action was very good for Shino, and in a way it was very bad. She still couldn't figure it out right now. But the simple truth was that, as a result, the man steadied the gun pointing at him.

Right now, Shino had more than enough information on the gun used in the robbery incident— «that gun».

In 1933, 90 years ago, the Soviet army officially used the gun «Tokarev TT33». Then, the Chinese copied it and produced «Type 54 Black Star». That was the gun's name.

The gun was .30 caliber, that is, it used 7.62mm diameter steel core bullets. Compared to the mainstream 9mm guns developed later, its caliber is lower, but it uses a lot of gun powder. For that reason, the bullet's initial speed is beyond the speed of sound, so it has the highest penetration power among all hand guns.

But as the recoil was also large, the Soviet Union in the 1950's designed a smaller gun using 9mm bullets. The «Makarov» replaced the Tokarev as their official gun in history.

This kind of gun was not something an 11 year old child was able to aim and shoot properly. But when the man strongly held onto her wrists trying to steal the gun away, at that instant, Shino pulled the trigger on reflex.

The violent recoil spread from her hands to her elbow then to her shoulders, but the majority of it was absorbed by the man's hands. The air expanded by heat again.

The man made a hiccup-like sound, released Shino's hands, and staggered back a few steps.

In the man's patterned grey shirt near his belly, a dark red circle rapidly expanded. "Aa... Ahaaa!!"

While he released a high-pitched cry, he pressed his hands to his abdomen. Maybe a large blood vessel was hit, as from between his fingers a spray of blood gushed out.

But the man did not fall. Black Star used a small caliber Full Metal Jacket bullet, so while it could easily pass through the human body, its stopping power is low.

With a strange sound, the man moved his blood covered hands toward Shino, again trying to catch her. The blood spraying out of his wound fell onto Shino's hands.

With her shaking hands, as if convulsing, she pulled the trigger again.

This time the pistol made a huge jump, pain shooting through her elbows and shoulders. Her body was thrown backward, her back hit the counter, knocking her breath out. She didn't really hear the gunshot noise this time.

The second bullet hit below the man's right collarbone, once again going through him and hitting the wall at his back. The man staggered, then foot slipped on his own blood, and he collapsed onto the linoleum floor on his back.

"Gaaaaa!!"

But that still didn't stop the man. He roared in anger and put both hands on the floor to try to stand up again.

Shino was panic-stricken. She thought, this time, if she doesn't «stop» the man for sure, she and her mother will absolutely be killed.

She ignored the sharp pain in her hands and shoulders, and walked two steps forward. She pointed the gun at the center of the man who had risen about 20cm from the ground.

The third shot dislocated her right shoulder. This time she didn't support her body and was blown away by the recoil, and fell head over heels to the floor. Even so, the pistol did not leave her hands.

Just as before, the bullet fired violently from the pistol greatly deviated from her target by about 10cm upward—

It hit almost the exact center of the man's face. With a thud, the man's head hit the floor. He no longer moved or yelled.

Shino desperately held her body up to confirm that the man had stopped moving.

—Protected.

Before anything, she thought. She protected her mother.

Shino moved her head, to look at her mother who was still on the floor a few meters away. And, the mother she loved more than anyone else in the world...

Was looking directly at Shino. Fear and panic clearly showing in her eyes.

Shino looked down at her hands. Her hands still holding the pistol were covered with dark red liquid droplets.

Shino opened her mouth, and finally started issuing a shrill scream.

"Aaaa...!!"

As a thin cry tore out from the depths of her throat, Shino continued to stare at the Procyon SL clenched in both of her hands. She could see the blood dripping from the back of her hands to her fingers. No matter how many times she blinked, it didn't disappear. Drip, drip. The sticky drops fell to her feet.

Suddenly, liquid started to overflow from both of her eyes. With a soft distortion, her sight was completely covered by the black radiance of the model gun.

In the depths of the darkness, she could see that man's face.

The third wave of bullets flew toward his face. The wounds were surprisingly small where the bullet shells hit, looking somewhat like moles. However, immediately afterward, a red mist drifted out from the back of his head. All expression and life bled out from his face.

But, abruptly, the left eye alone moved and the pupil, looking like a bottomless pit, gazed at Shino.

It looked straight into Shino's eyes.

"... Ah ... ah"

Suddenly, her tongue stuck to the back of her throat and she couldn't breathe. At the same time, she felt her stomach violently constricting.

Shino clenched her teeth, mustered all of her willpower and threw the Procyon to the floor. Immediately, with teetering steps, she ran to the kitchen and turned the doorknob of the bathroom with her right hand, cold and wet with sweat.

At the same time that Shino lifted the toilet lid, hot liquid gushed out from the bottom of her stomach. Until everything in her stomach was discharged, she vomited, again and again, causing her body to twist and spasm.

When the contractions of her stomach had finally settled down, Shino was exhausted.

Her left hand extended to flush the toilet. With a bit of difficulty, Shino rose and, after taking off her glasses, she washed both of her hands and face over and over again with sharp, cold water from the washbasin.

Lastly, she rinsed her mouth, took a clean towel from the shelf and, while wiping her face, left the bathroom. She could not think clearly.

On unsteady legs, Shino returned to her room.

Averting her gaze from it as much as possible, Shino covered the model gun that had rolled onto floor. Lifting it up over the cloth, she immediately threw it to the back of the open drawer. Noisily, Shino closed the drawer and, exhausted, fell face down onto the bed.

Water droplets from her wet bangs and her flowing tears mixed together on her cheeks and soaked her futon. Unconsciously, in a small voice, she mumbled the same thing over and over again.

"Help me... someone... help me... save me... anyone..."

Her memory of the several days right after the robbery incident were not very clear.

When the adults dressed in the navy blue uniform said, in a tense tone, to pass over the gun, her finger had stiffened and, no matter how hard she had tried, would not come loose.

Around her, there were many red lights and yellow tape shaking in the wind. The white light shining from over there dizzied her eyes.

After she was finally picked up by the patrol car, she noticed the pain in her right shoulder. When she timidly appealed, the policeman moved her over to an ambulance— She remembered only bits and pieces of the rest.

While in a hospital bed, two policewomen repeatedly asked about the incident. Even though she said many times that she wanted to see her mother, her request could only be granted afterward.

Shino was discharged after about three days and she returned to her grandparents' house, but her mother's hospitalization lasted over a month. They could no longer return to the mild ordinary days from before the incident.

Due to the voluntary restraint of the media, further details about the incident were avoided in the news. The death of the suspect of the post office armed robbery was reported to the prosecutor, but a trial was not held even once. However, it was a small town incident. The details of what happened inside the post office leaked out— and more than that, they were blown up and exaggerated and they spread through the entire town like a prairie fire.

In the year and a half left of elementary school, Shino was peppered with every derivative of «murderer». Since entering middle school, the insults were replaced with complete disregard.

However, for Shino, the state of her surroundings were not much of a problem. From the beginning, Shino had very little interest in belonging to a group.

But the scar left in her heart by the incident— no matter how many years had passed, they didn't heal and continued to torment Shino.

Since then, just looking at anything similar to a gun would force Shino to vividly recall the memory of the incident and experience the symptoms of a violent shock: hyperventilation, body rigidity, loss of orientation, vomiting, or, in the worst cases, fainting. While these attacks were certainly induced

by laying eyes on a toy gun held by a child by the roadside, they could easily be induced even through a TV screen.

Therefore, Shino became unable to watch most dramas and movies. There had also been several times where she had attacks while watching the video teaching materials used in her social science class. Comparatively, books were safe— old works of literature devoid of firearms, especially. So, for the majority of middle school, she passed time in a dim corner of the school library, turning pages of large, complete works.

She appealed to her grandparents that when she graduated middle school, she wanted to work somewhere far away, and was met with strong opposition. Her grandparents wanted her to go to high school. So, Shino said that if she were to attend high school, at least, like long ago, she wanted to attend one in the neighborhood of Tokyo where she had lived with her father and mother. While she certainly wanted to go to a place where there were no rumors and curious stares that always followed her around, more than that, she was confident that as long as she stayed in this town, the wounds in her heart would never recover in her lifetime.

Of course, Shino's symptoms were diagnosed as typical PTSD, and in four years, she received countless counseling. She obediently took the prescribed medicine. But the words of the doctors, along with something strangely resembling a smile on their face, could only go so far as to touch the surface of Shino's heart— scratch it— unable to truly reach the wounded place. In a clean examination room, while listening to them repeat the words "I understand. It was very painful. It was very hard," Shino mumbled the same phrase over and over again in her mind.

—If that is the case, have you ever killed someone with a gun?

Now, on reflection, she realized that that attitude hindered the building of trust and shunned any treatment. Nevertheless, even now, that was her undisguised intention. Was what she did good or evil? A clear, decisive answer to that was probably the only thing that Shino wished for. But of course, a doctor who could answer that question does not exist.

However, no matter how much pain her memory and attacks caused, she never once thought of killing herself.

She did not regret pointing that gun at that man and pulling the trigger. When her mother was held at gunpoint, there wasn't any other choice for

Shino. Even if she returned to the instant of that incident, without a doubt, she would have done the same thing.

But if Shino chose the escape of suicide, even that man would turn in his grave, or so she thought.

That's why she wanted to become strong. In that situation, there was only one course of action, though she still desired the strength to say so. Strength, like on the battlefield, where female soldiers defeated their enemies mercilessly. It was because of this that she wanted to try living alone.

When she left the town in which she graduated middle school, the only ones to whom she bid farewell were her grandfather, her grandmother, and her mother, who embraced her and stroked her hair. She would always recognize her as the young child before the incident.

She moved to a place where the air was dirty, the water was hard to drink, and everything was expensive.

And then, she met Shinkawa Kyouji and the VRMMORPG «Gun Gale Online».

Finally, her breath and pulse settled down, and Shino opened her eyes.

Lying face down on her bed, her left cheek on her pillow, in front of Shino's gaze was a full length mirror.

In the mirror, with wet hair clinging to her forehead, a girl looked back. A bit too skinny, with just her eyes appearing large. The nose was small and the lips thin. All in all, she appeared similar to a malnourished kitten.

The sniper rifle user of the wilderness, Sinon. Her build and the hairstyle with short hair tied on both sides of her face resembled Shino, but except for that, nothing else. That girl, as it were, was a fierce wildcat.

Though extremely scared, when she first logged into GGO and was taken to that battlefield not knowing anything, Shino discovered something unexpected. It was very different from the real world's Japan, as the landscape was too much like another world. And in that world, if she tried to touch any kind of gun— no, even if she shot down other players, some of the tension would be remembered to some degree, but those detestable fits would not occur.

Shino was confident that she had finally found a way to overcome that memory. In fact, because she tried playing GGO, if she looked at pictures, the attacks no longer happened to some degree, and she seemed able to talk to Kyouji about the weapons in GGO.

No, it wasn't only that. Half a year ago, when she received the huge yet brutal rifle named «Hecate II», Shino fell in love. While other girls her age had pets or stuffed animals to appease them, stroking the smooth barrel helped Shino to relax, and if she leaned her cheek on the round stock, she felt warm.

Together with this gun, in the virtual wilderness, if she continues to fight, someday, her wounds will close and her fears will vanish. Believing that, she blew away innumerable monsters and players with certain kill bullets.

However.

Really? Is this really all right?

A voice in her heart asked back.

Sinon was already, out of tens of thousands of GGO players, someone in the top thirty. She freely commanded the anti-materiel rifle unlike anyone else at the level of actual combat. She could give anyone she captured in her scope certain death with her unstoppable bullets. A warrior with a heart of ice. It was not an exaggeration to say that was the existence the former Shino hoped to become.

And yet— the real world's Shino, as usual, couldn't even hold a model gun.

Truly... truly... is this all right?

The eyes of the girl in the mirror were, behind her glasses, shaking and seemed to be at a loss.

These glasses she began to wear last year did not have any prescription. They weren't for eye correction, but were used as «protective equipment». The strong NXT polymer-made lenses, for example, would not break even if a bullet hit it— or so it was written in the leaflet. She doesn't know if it was true or not but, she economized her living expenses and the manufactured glasses gave Shino a modest sense of security. Now, when she goes out, if she doesn't always wear them, she won't calm down.

But, in short, she relies on this small accessory.

She closed her eyes tightly and again, a frail question was born in her chest.

Someone... Tell me... What should I do...?

—No one will save me!!

A cry from her heart called her to reject and erase the weak voice within her, and Shino rose up. In front of her eyes, on top of a small table beside her bed, the silver circle on her Amusphere was shining.

It just wasn't enough. That was the problem.

Twenty-one gunners stronger than Sinon still existed in that world. Crush those players, send them to hell, and simply dominate the wilderness as the strongest player of Gun Gale Online, and that would be when—

Shino would completely become Sinon and, in the real world, would be able to gain true strength. «That guy» and «that gun» were, until now, buried in the many targets that Sinon killed and never again will that memory rise up.

Shino picked up the air conditioner remote, turned on a weak heating, took off the jacket of her uniform in one stroke and tossed it away. She undid the hook of her skirt, pulled it from her legs, collected everything and tossed it on her floor. Lastly, she took off her light blue glasses and softly placed them on a corner of her writing table.

She immediately laid on the bed, picked up the AmuSphere, and put it over her head.

With some fumbling, she turned on the power and as soon as the electronic sound informed her of being in standby, she opened her mouth.

"LINK START"

That murmured voice, like a child tired from crying, cracked helplessly.

Chapter 5

After the browser opened, it automatically accessed the site with the start-up URL. Many double-layered windows were displayed.

They were all related to Gun Gale Online, in particular, a collection of information focused on «Death Gun».

«He» used his right index finger to operate the 3D mouse, making the current most relevant site active. On the front page with the words «death gun information summary site», only the words 'Death Gun' were red.

Looking at the history first, it seemed the administrator hadn't made any new updates tonight. He then moved to the message board. Some new ones were written since last night's check, and the status tree was flashing «NEW» icon here and there. He read them in sequence.

—Those two, Zekushiido and Tarako haven't appeared. Has it been one month? Maybe their accounts were irresponsibly disconnected? Someone who can contact them in the real world, if you have any information share it PLZ.

—Told you there wasn't any. It was said no one in their squadron knows how to contact them in real life. Also, whoever discloses personal information in GGO is a fool.

—Since we know the day and time that Death Gun shot them, if those two really died, will we know if we can find any VRMMO player that died around that time?

—Don't loop the topic, read the past log. For a person living alone, no one will notice if they die. We already checked that, asking the police won't get any answers. Incidentally, if you ask Zasker with an English mail, they will send the standard response related to user's personal information.

—As I thought it could be that Zeku-tan and Tarako-tan wanted some excitement for their retirement commemoration. You two, if you don't come out and expose the truth soon, the impact will be lost.

—After all, someone has to use his body as a test, I think. In this case, tomorrow at 2330 I will wear a red rose at my chest and wait in front of the Gurokken central bank's front. Death Gun-san please shoot me.

—Hero debut! But if you don't expose your real name and address before you die, it would be meaningless.

—Or rather please use a Net Cafe for a public dive.

—.....

«He» clicked his tongue in annoyance. He moved the mouse wheel to make the next window active. However, no matter which message board or information site, he could not find the desired article or written message.

Originally he envisioned, after two people had died, "Is «Death Gun»'s power real?" That kind of rumor would spread around the net, with GGO players wondering in fear if they were the next target, having people retire from the game— that was what was supposed to happen.

However right now, the foolish net gamers still had not realized «Death Gun»'s real terror, and ended it with talk of jokes. The total number of GGO user accounts had hardly been reduced.

Also, that the real world death of «Zekushiido» and «Usujio Tarako» had not been reported was beyond his calculation. It seemed there was a large number of strange death incidents in the city every day, and if it wasn't a clear crime case, it won't be on the news.

Of course, the hearts of two people «He» shot were definitely stopped in the real world, and he knew they died. That was «Death Gun»'s power.

«He» had a strong temptation to write that information on the summary site's message board. However, it would be hard for him to provide a concrete source for his information, and if he did that then it would weaken the legend of «Death Gun». «Death Gun» will be the first and last absolute warrior to descend on that wilderness, suppressing the management company's power, a real god of death.

Well, fine.

«He» took a deep breath to calm down.

Soon the third «Bullet of Bullets» will be held. «Death Gun» will take part in the tournament, again kill two, if possible three people, that is the plan. Of course he has to pass the preliminary without using that gun. For that day, if he logs in 20 hours a day to train his stats, it will certainly be possible.

BoB is subject to a great degree of attention. «MMO Stream» will broadcast it in real time, and not only GGO but other VRMMO players will be watching it as well. He will not only reign on that large stage in name and reality as strongest, but if the people he shot with that gun disappeared from the net, then there won't be any foolish people who would doubt «Death Gun»'s power.

If he obtains that degree of attention, he wouldn't be able to use his current account anymore, but that doesn't matter. As long as he has that gun, a new «Death Gun» can easily descend into the wilderness.

Then continue to kill. In the plan, the sacrifices will rise up to seven people. At that time there should be players constantly retiring, then the Gun Gale Online title would have been put on a death sentence.

«Death Gun» would become legend.

It won't be comparable to that cursed death game «Sword Art Online» in the number of deaths, that was simply a crazy person cooking the users' brains with a microwave oven.

«Death Gun»'s power isn't of that low dimension. The bullet released in the virtual world will stop the heart in the real world. The only other person who knows the secret is «his» other half. That is why «Death Gun» is the strongest person. He won't become a questionable rumor like the «Black Swordsman» who cleared SAO. The time that he will become the top player of all VRMMOs will soon come.

Absolute power— Legendary devil— The strongest— The strongest— The strongest—...

«He» noticed that without him knowing, his right hand was holding the mouse tightly, he relaxed his shoulders while breathing raggedly.

He was looking forward to that day. If he obtains that legend, then he has no more use for this stupid world. «He» will forever bid farewell to those annoying stupid people.

After closing all the open double windows in the browser, «He» opened a new local HTML file.

Seven portraits in a column— made from cropping GGO screenshots, to the right of each is their name, equipment, and other information. The top

picture, «Zekushiido», and the one below it, «Usujio Tarako», pictures were darkened, with a blood red X mark through them.

This is «Death Gun»'s target list, put in another way, this is the number of «Death Bullets» in that gun's magazine. All seven were famous, strong players in GGO.

«He» slowly scrolled down the file, placing the bottom most picture in the center of the screen. The only female player in the seven.

The screen shot was taken from a right side angle. Her pale blue short hair was tied on either side of her face as it came down, hiding half of her cheek lines. It's a shame her mouth could not be seen with the deeply wound sand-yellow muffler around it, but her deep blue eyes that seem like a cat's eyes shone with enough charm.

The name displayed on the right was «Sinon». Main weapon is the anti-materiel rifle «Ultima Ratio Hecate II».

«He» had seen her many times in the game directly. When she was shopping at the Gurokken market street, sitting in a park bench eating a hot dog from a food stand, and sprinting in the battle field with that huge rifle on her back— All of them full of coquettish charm that stirred his desire to possess her. He had almost never seen her smile, her eyes were usually filled with sorrow, but that attracted him even more.

«He» had some hesitation about this girl named Sinon being «Death Gun»'s target. If not only in game, her body and heart in the real world as well became his—

But «His» other half, «Death Gun»'s other arm, probably wished for her death. Sinon was a cold sniper in GGO, there was almost no one who didn't recognize her as a famous player known as the goddess of the underworld. There was no one more suitable than her to be offered as a flower for «Death Gun»'s legend.

«He» stretched out his right hand, fingers stroking the photo of Sinon.

In the touch of the slippery polished screen, «He» really felt the real girl's softness and warmth.

Chapter 6

Turning on the LED lights and leaning sideways to turn while on my bike, I passed through a large gate.

At that moment, feeling the critical gazes of the people walking on both sides of the avenue, I lowered the speed of my bike in a hurry.

This 125cc, 2-stroke, Thai-made, dilapidated motorcycle obtained through Agil's connections was, in this era where electric scooters are common, emitting noise. When she rode with me, Suguha would explode with complaints like "Noisy— Smelly— Uncomfortable to ride." Each time, I'd lie by saying that if she could get used to the wind then she could get used to the noise, but I regretted not choosing a 4-stroke scooter as well.

Possibly, the place I was rushing to was somewhere like this, especially if it was within the grounds of the hospital.

With the speed of a donkey pulling a wagon, I slowly continued along the avenue and saw the parking lot entrance ahead. Relieved, I rode in and parked at the edge of the motorcycle lot. I took out the real ignition key even in this era, and while taking off the helmet, I could faintly smell disinfectant riding on the cold December wind.

It's Saturday, one week after my meeting with Kikuoka in the expensive cake shop.

I had left after reading the email saying that the preparations for my starting area in Gun Gale Online were finished. What kind of place was I heading to? It was a large municipal hospital in the Chiyoda ward, a municipal of central Tokyo. Though I don't usually enter the heart of Tokyo, I already knew the way. It was the same hospital I was previously hospitalized in for my muscle rehabilitation after being freed from SAO.

Though rehabilitation had only taken a month before I was discharged, I had continued to commute back and forth along this road many times for examinations and the like. In the past half year, I hadn't visited the hospital, but when I looked up at the white building, which had become a familiar sight, strong feelings of nostalgia and forlornness rose to the surface. I lightly shook my head, shook out the sentiments, and started walking in the direction of the entrance.

The discussion six days ago on Sunday in which I explained my current situation to Asuna reappeared in my mind. It had been at the promenade in the Imperial Palace near this hospital.

"...Eeeeeehhhhhhh!?! Ki...Kirito-kun, are you quitting ALO...!?"

I saw Asuna's eyes, wide with disbelief, begin to grow teary, and shook my head vigorously in a hurry.

"Th... that's not it, that's not it at all! It will just be for a few days; I'll immediately transfer back! The... the truth is, because there is a certain reason, I have to check out another VRMMO..."

With this appeal, Asuna finally relaxed her shoulders and, this time, a dubious look rose to the surface in her eyes.

"Check it out...? If that's the case, why can't you make a new account like usual? Why do you have to convert over?"

"That, that is... It's that 'Glasses' from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications..."

Then, with some difficulty, I explained why Kikuoka Seijirou's summons comprised half of the reason why the place of the date was the Imperial Palace while intentionally omitting one part.

Just as we arrived at the gate, we finished our general conversation, returned our admission ticket at the window booth, and when we were near the Hirakawa Gate Bridge that spanned over the moat, Asuna, with a really complicated face, said.

"Kikuoka-san's request... Then it seems like it can't be helped. I, somehow feel unsure if it's alright to put my faith completely in him or not... But I am extremely in his debt..."

"No, I have the same feeling."

At that moment, we both wryly smiled.

But Asuna immediately returned to a serious expression, gripping my hands tightly and saying.

"...Return as quickly as you can. 'That' place is our only home.."

I nodded, lowered my gaze to the surface of the moat and replied.

"Of course. I'll return to ALO as soon as possible. It's just research on what's going on in the «Gun Gale Online» game."

—That's right.

I wasn't completely honest with Asuna about the true purpose of Kikuoka's request. In short, the core of my mission was to contact the player who might possess a mysterious power, the rumored «Death Gun». I didn't tell her, because I believed that if I did say it, she would undoubtedly stop me, or perhaps propose to dive together.

It was a selfish excuse, but I had already decided that I have no intention of letting her anywhere near a virtual reality with the slightest hint of danger.

Of course, I also believe that, probably 90% of the time, the «Death Gun» talk was a product of rumors.

That, from a virtual reality, a human in the real world could be killed.

No matter how many times I thought about it, I could not believe that such a thing was possible. AmuSphere, no matter how you say it, is only a machine a bit more technologically advanced than a normal TV.

Technology such as «Virtual Reality» and «Full Dive» tend to seem magical but, in the end, it was merely a convenient tool, and was by no means something like a magic item that could detach the soul from a person's real body and transport it to a parallel world.

But, the remaining one-tenth of the probability moved my legs to this place.

Many months ago, I was sorting an accumulation of old electronic magazines within my PC storage; one magazine was published just before the operation of SAO. In it I discovered a short interview with Argus Director Kayaba Akihito. There, while he was alive, he talked about 'it'.

—'It' referred to the «Realized World» called An Incarnating Radius, abbreviated as Aincrad. Within it, all players would see many dreams becoming a reality. They would find swords, monsters, and mysteries, without stopping to realize that amongst those game-like symbols, a power which forces even the players themselves to change exists in that world—

Undoubtedly, I've changed. Asuna, as well, has changed. Even Agil, Klein, Liz, Silica and the others, as in that world, in the two years that passed, we

definitely experienced a change in personality to a degree that we cannot return to how we once were.

But, what if we assumed Kayaba's «evolution» did not stop there...? Thanks to the VRMMO execution package «The Seed», now, while at the nook of the limitless growth of the VR Nexus, if we can assume the framework called reality and virtual reality itself are able to change, what kind of factors will be born...?

Making an *uin* sound, the automatic door in front of my eyes opened and the smell of detergent and warm air surged forward and interrupted my unending thoughts.

On top of the fact that two GGO players died in the real world, I cannot affirm that contacting «Death Gun» would pose absolutely no danger. After I return to ALO, if I am honest about this to Asuna, she will definitely get mad. But eventually, she will surely understand.

To me—who supposedly cut off the time to monitor Aincrad, the person named Kirito who released «The Seed» package into the world—there were no other choices beyond this.

After visiting the bathroom, relying on the printout of Kikuoka's email, I finally arrived at the designated room on the third floor of the hospital ward. There wasn't a patient's name on the plate beside the door. After knocking, I pulled the door open—

"Ossu! Kirigaya-kun, long time no see!"

The one who greeted me was a nurse I was acquainted with. She took care of me previously during my long rehabilitation.

Under the nurse cap, her long hair was braided into three thick strands where at the end of that, a small, white ribbon swung. Dressed in a light pink uniform, her considerably tall stature for a girl cast a sharp silhouette that most certainly appeared to be a temptation for the hospitalized patients. On the left side of her chest was a small nameplate with «Aki» written on it.

The small face expressing a smile was certainly, appropriately clean and beautiful like a white-robed angel, but, responding as necessary, knowing she can become scary when she likes, I got out of my stupor in one second and hurriedly lowered my head.

"Ah... He-Hello, sorry for not contacting you."

At that moment, Nurse Aki suddenly extended both of her hands, and touched me, from my shoulders to my arms, and tightly grasped the sides of my stomach.

"Wa...waaa!?"

"O—, you've sufficiently put on some meat. But, it isn't sufficient yet, have you been eating correctly?"

"I, I've been eating, I've been eating. But, uh, how should I put it, why is Aki-san here?"

I looked around the room but in the small, private room, there weren't any other people.

"I heard about you while talking with that government official with glasses. By all means, for the sake of that government official, the virtual... network? You're doing an investigation? Even though it hasn't been a year since you came back, it's difficult, isn't it? Given that, since I was in charge during your rehabilitation, I was requested to keep check of the monitors, and today, I got out of my normal shift. Having talked to my superiors, as one would expect from the power of the state, I certainly felt that. Anyway, again, for a short while, we'll be working together, Kirigaya-kun."

"Ah... Sa-Same here."

Somehow, believing that I am weak to beauties, he came up with this shrewd plan, Kikuokaaaaa— while cursing the agent who wasn't there in my mind, with a smile, I grabbed the hand that Nurse Aki held out.

"...So, that government guy with glasses didn't come?"

"Yeah, he said something about a meeting that he couldn't get out of. He entrusted me with a message for you."

I opened up the manila envelope that was handed over and took out the handwritten piece of paper.

'The report was forwarded by mail to the usual address. It has been requested for the overhead expenses to be paid completely with remuneration after the mission is completed. P.S.: Just because you are alone with a beautiful nurse in a private room, you shouldn't let your youthful impulses run wild.'

At that moment, I crushed the memo completely with the envelope and threw it into the pocket of my rider jacket. If this was read by Nurse Aki, her harassment act could really be prosecuted.

Offering a stiff smile at the suspiciously winking female, I said.

"Ah— ...Well then, we should immediately connect to the net."

"Ah, yes yes. Let's start the preparations."

At the side of the bed that I was guided to, bright colored monitors were lined up and on top of the bed rest, a brand new AmuSphere was giving off a silver radiance.

"Now then, strip, Kirigaya-kun."

"What... What!?"

"The electrodes, to stick them on. In any case, when you were hospitalized, I saw everything already so you don't have to turn red—"

"... Uh, is only the top okay...?"

After Nurse Aki thought for a moment, fortunately, she nodded.

Resignedly, I took off my jacket and my long-sleeved shirt and lay down on the bed. All at once, the electrodes used by the electro-cardiogram monitor were stuck to various places on my upper body. In terms of AmuSpheres, there exist some that also have heart rate monitors but Kikuoka seemed to have misgivings that the feature might be taken down by cracking. Looking at that one thing, I understood that he is, at least somewhat, truly concerned about my safety.

"Alright, with this, everything is ready."

When the nurse checking the last monitor nodded deeply, fumbling, I picked up the AmuSphere, put it on my head, and turned on the power.

"Uh, well then... I'm off. Probably, I'll be diving for around four, five hours so..."

"Alright. I'll properly watch over Kirigaya-kun's body so don't worry and take care."

"I... I'm in your care."

I wonder how things turned out this way... While I was thinking about this question, seemingly after everything that had happened, I closed my eyes.

At the same time, with my ears, the electronic sound informed me of standby completion.

"Link Start"

After reciting the command, the radiating white light that I had grown used to seeing blocked my field of vision, my consciousness was released from my body.

The moment that I landed in the virtual world, I remembered that faint uncomfortable feeling.

The reason was confirmed after a few seconds. That's because the sky had one side dyed with yellow with traces of faint reddish tinges.

I heard that the time inside «Gun Gale Online» was synchronized with reality. In other words, since it was just one o' clock, the sky was supposed to be the same blue that could be seen through the window earlier in the hospital. Despite this, the sky showed the depressing color of twilight, there was no discernible reason for this.

Anyway, after imagining one thing after another, I shrugged my shoulders and ignored it. The desolate earth setting of GGO was modeled on Earth after the last war. It was probably a production for the sake of giving an apocalyptic atmosphere.

Once again, I turned my eyes to the majestic appearance of GGO's central city «SBC Gurokken» spread out in front of me.

As one would expect, an excellence that only exists in SF VRMMO, that form differs a lot from the newly established capital city «Yggdrasil City» of the world up in the tree, Alfheim and from the previous Aincrad's layered levels' fantastic townscapes.

The buildings with a metallic feel rose as if piercing the heavens, air corridors connecting them together like the mesh of a net. Neon colored hologram advertisements were busily streaming in the gaps between the buildings; approaching the ground, they increased in number, like a flood of color and sound.

Finally, I looked at the ground and what I was standing on was not anything like soil or stone, but a path paved with metal plates.

Behind me was what seemed to be a domed building established as the initial character starting location, and in front of me, a street like a city's main street stretched out. To the left and right of the street, questionable shops were tightly lined up in a spectacle resembling some side street in Akihabara.

Then, the players coming and going were also only groups that held an atmosphere that couldn't go straightforward. Overwhelmingly, there were a lot of males. Perhaps it was due to my experience with ALO, which has a relatively high proportion of females, or possibly, that world's inhabitants' delicate fairies. The sight here instead was overwhelmingly of rough men, strutting while wearing military camouflage jackets and black body armor. Truthfully, it gave a feeling of oppression and, how should I put it, excess, or if I say it clearly, filth. In addition, with all of those unfriendly eyes, truthfully, it was hard to talk to them.

The reason to be overwhelmed was also, that the usual players hung on their shoulders and back; the clunky, black, rustic weapons— guns.

It lacked the decorative-like element of swords and spears and instead, there was only one intention with guns. They are weapons. It was only for the sake of defeating the enemy that it was of this form and color.

In other words, I saw something that can also be said of this world itself and I affirmed it in my mind.

The only purpose to exist in this game is to "fight, kill, and rob." ALO's touted component of "enjoying activities in an illusionary world" was almost completely stripped away.

Therefore, magnificent and pretty figures were probably a negative factor. For the sake of intimidating enemies, outward appearance was an important parameter for the soldiers. Why many of the males grew out their beards and carved out conspicuous scars on their faces was perhaps for this reason.

As for how it concerned me, what kind of appearance does my avatar give off?

I immediately wondered and looked over my own body. For the sake of my objective to be targeted by the prominent evil "Death Gun", I wanted the form of a macho soldier from a Hollywood movie—

...I had an unpleasant premonition.

The skin on both of my hands was glassy white and the fingers were also surprisingly thin. My body, which was wrapped in a black military fighting jacket, depending on the circumstances, was more slender than me in reality. From the feeling of my viewpoint, somehow, I didn't exactly think that my height was very tall either.

Corresponding to the dive into Gun Gale Online, as I explained to Asuna a few days ago, I didn't generate an initial character from the beginning. If I had done that, I would probably never be able to meet "Death Gun", who targets strong people.

Using the VRMMO development and support package, "The Seed", and making generate— more than that, if I were to go into detail, for the worlds that operate with the "Cardinal" system, only one mutual meta-rule existed.

If you use that function, it is possible to maintain those abilities if the character data that was built up in the game was transferred to a game administered by another company. It greatly resembled the SIM cards of cell phone terminals that you can potentially freely replace with a different carrier's terminal.

For example, you transferred a character with stats of 100 strength and 80 speed built up in a game labeled A to Game B. After doing so, a "Relative Preservation" transformation of Game A's strength would occur, and in Game B, a character with 40 STR and 30 AGI would be born. To put it simply, a fighter-type warrior with strength in the upper middle level in ALO would be reincarnated as an upper middle fighter in GGO.

Of course, this isn't a function that increases the copies of a character. The moment it is converted, the character in the original world is completely eliminated and more so, because the only thing that could be transferred was the character, items could not all be brought over, though it is convenient, it was an act that required courage. This time, when I had to transfer over the character that I used in ALO "Spriggan Kirito", to GGO, I forcibly left almost all of my items in a safe in the new general store that Agil just opened up in the Yggdrasil City.

Now then, by the convert function, I acquired the strength of ALO's Kirito, though, because the character was re-rolled and built up, it wasn't the ridiculous status of the Kirito in SAO, but because I couldn't bring over my appearance, like items, I couldn't predict what kind of form would be randomly generated. Therefore, I might as well hope for the form of a brawny soldier, but...

While feeling this unrelenting discomfort, I surveyed my surroundings, and walked up to the mirrored glass that adorned the dome that I had just left.



Then, my eyes widened in astonishment.

"What the hell is this!?"

What was being reflected in the glass was a form that was a hundred light-years away from my hopes.

The height was obviously shorter than when I was a Spriggan, and furthermore, it was thinner. The hair color, without changing, was still black but, the hair flowed smoothly from the top of my head to around my shoulder-blades. My face was, just like my hands, an almost transparent white, and my lips were a vivid crimson.

The eye color as well, even though it was black identical to the hair, it was shining excessively. Those eyes that were fringed with long eyelashes raised a pure yet bewitching sight from the mirror, so much so that I unintentionally forgot that the image was of myself and let my eyes wander freely. Again, I looked at the facade, and let out a long sigh.

Asuna often said that SAO's Kirito had a considerably feminine face, but this form was already beyond that level anymore. Just where the heck would you find a soldier's strength in this form, and with that, I stood frozen in place, in a daze. A guy who was eating something a little way away suddenly waved at me and from behind, called out to me who was reflected in the glass.

"Hey young lady, you have good luck! That avatar, F1300 type! That type rarely comes out. So how about it, since it is now, you only just started, why don't you sell that account? I'll give you two mega credits!"

"....."

Stopping my thoughts about my current state for the moment, I looked at the guy's face but, suddenly, a certain possibility arose and, in a fluster, using both hands, I touched my chest. But fortunately, there was just a feeling of flatness so my misgivings were gone. It seemed that my fear of a sex reversal accident was unfounded.

The recent VR games, for almost all of the titles, forbid changing the sex of the player and avatar. The reason is because the long-term use of an avatar of the opposite sex results in adverse effects for the spirit and body that cannot be ignored. However, I have heard that, because the identification of the players' sex occurs due to the players' brain waves, in

extremely rare cases, due to some impulse the system decides with the opposite sex, players have been startled when they dive in.

Now that I think about it, changing the sex setting was possible in the original SAO, but immediately after the start, the system reverted us to our original sex, I wonder if after all, it was because Kayaba understood the adverse effects... And with those sudden out of place thoughts wandering around in my head, I finally looked at the male face, and while shrugging my shoulders, I replied.

"Uhh... I'm sorry but, I'm a guy."

That voice too, though slightly lower, was sufficient to be a tone widely used by girls. Dejectedly, while I was waiting for an answer, the guy, after becoming speechless for a short while, started to talk on and on with vigor.

"Then, then, is that M9000 type!? That's, that's amazing.. Then I'll give you four, no, five megacredits. Sell it to me, by all means, sell it to me please!!"

Selling it, let alone giving it to you, I wanted to exchange it with your outward appearance but, unfortunately, that isn't something that I can do.

"Um, this isn't my initial character but a converted one. It can't easily be exchanged for money. Sorry."

"I... I see..."

The guy, with a characteristic face of disappointment, observed me from all sides but before long, pulling himself together, he asked,

"Gossip then, that rare avatar seems to have been used for a long time in a previous account. As a reference, can you count up your previous account's play time for me?"

"What? My, my play time?"

I suddenly thought about it. The account before I converted, basically, the play time of the swordsman Kirito that went from SAO to ALO was at least around 2 years... in other words, seven hundred and 30 days multiplied by twenty-four hours.

"Uhh... ten thou..."

I started to answer truthfully, but I quickly caught myself. Because it has only been three years since the VRMMO game genre came out, the only

ones who have up to ten thousand hours of dive experience are the former SAO players.

"Uh, around one year. That's why, of course it's a coincidence right?"

"I see... well, if you change your mind, please contact me."

After saying that, he pushed an item resembling a transparent card on to me and reluctantly departed. These were cards that had the character name, sex, guild and other things written on them, but then it disappeared into light particles while I was looking at it, but the data had probably been added to the address book or something else in the system window.

With a sidelong glance, I still glared at the me that was unrelentingly reflected in the evil glass, and I wondered if there was something that I could do about it, but nothing came to mind.

This conversion log is embedded into my character data so when I returned to ALO, I will be in Kirito's pointy-haired Spriggan form, but if I convert to the GGO world once again, I will get assigned to this avatar which one couldn't tell apart whether male or female.

'Looking for good luck inside of misfortune' is my motto so I, for a few minutes, thought about this and that and finally, I spun out a "good thing."

The reason that I came to this world was solely to contact the rumored player who was called «Death Gun» and although I didn't want to be attacked, it was the only way in deciding the authenticity of that power by any means possible. For that reason, as long as I showed off my strength, I would definitely stand out.

Because GGO, from the nature of the game, probably has a very small amount of female players, this form that looks like a pretty girl at first glance will definitely stand out in a way that I didn't want to. They would be extremely unlikely to wish for even a fragment of such things like the intimidating air of a battlefield, but here, there is no choice but to covet more combat capability.

In relation to advertising strength, for now, there is one way.

With the common gameplay— in other words, with things like dungeon clearing, and something I don't want to do, namely player killing, time is needed for your name to become famous. However, fortunately, in this game, in just a few days, the event to decide the strongest player «Bullet

of Bullets» will be held. I'll register for that event and advance to the finals of the battle royal match. If I cut to the top, I would certainly be noticed by «Death Gun» or perhaps, depending on the circumstances, there is the possibility that the person himself would show up on that stage.

Diving into a game for the first time, I felt uneasy about how I was going to fight or how much, but anyway, I couldn't do anything but try and find out. Fighting against someone who fights with a gun is probably not the same as fighting an archer or a mage in ALO but, generally speaking, there are limits with VRMMO's; there should be a decently common feature. I can only try as much as I can— If I can't reach that power, at that time, it would become the responsibility of Kikuoka who forced this unreasonable task on me.

Anyhow, first is the tournament entry procedure and then the equipment purchase.

I looked at my body one last time, sighed, turned in the direction of the main street, and then started to walk. Immediately afterwards, I realized that I was unconsciously fingering the hair that was swinging against my cheek and was assailed by a dark and gloomy mood.

—After a few minutes, all too quickly, I was lost.

The city with the strange name of «SBC Gurokken» seems to take the form of a huge floor with many multilayered structures seemingly piled on top of one another. In front of me while I was standing still, there were a series of hierarchical buildings like a smaller scale of the floating city Aincrad, the colors of the sunset peeping through the apertures in the distance. The buildings, lined up as if to penetrate the layers and connected with escalator and elevator like corridors through the air, shining and sparkling were, truthfully, beautiful but, in all practicality, were also rather complex like a dungeon.

Of course, I could have brought out a detailed three dimensional map from the main menu but, with my current position, in actuality, it couldn't compare to the scene spread out right before my eyes.

If this was a standalone RPG, I would recklessly walk around in desperation, and even have to walk back to the starting point, but fortunately, this is an MMO. At times like these, there is a measure that one could take.

I found the tag of a person coming and going in front of my eyes that were not of an NPC but a player, and trotting over, called out from the rear.

"Excuse me. I seem to be a little lost..."

And then, immediately thought that I had messed up.

It was because, however I looked, the person turning around was a girl.

The thin pale blue swaying hair was casually short but there was a tuft of hair tied up on both sides of her forehead. Under her distinct eyebrows, large indigo colored eyes that gave off a feline ambiance were shining, and a small nose with a color that continued to her thin lips.

Unwillingly, I had a thought that by some possibility, this person was the same as me and was a boy with a girl-like avatar and ran my eyes over her body with lightning speed but, under the sand-colored scarf, through the open zipper of the jacket, the shirt visually expanded out. Furthermore, she had a considerably small stature. Why I didn't realize that was because my line of sight had also been considerably lowered.

In VRMMO's, situations when a male player who calls out "I've lost my way" to a female player, up to 70%, were entirely to flirt.

—However, unexpectedly, that kind of facial expression immediately disappeared.

"...Did you just start this game? Where are you going?"

The mouth that talked in a clear and pretty voice even had a faint smile appearing. Puzzling it over in my mind as to why that could be, I finally hit upon the reason. This girl was making the same misunderstanding as the avatar buyer who had talked to me earlier. That I was a girl like her. How the hell did this happen.

"Ah...um..."

On reflex, I thought to clear up my gender but right on the verge of doing so, I stopped.

There is a certain reason to this, as the circumstances of this situation seem to be good. After this, at another time, if a male player were to call out to me and misunderstand that I am female, it can become a little bit of a difficult situation. 'Use whatever you can use' is my second motto so,

though it is a bit mean to this girl, it's best to just leave this misunderstanding as it is.

"Yes, it is my first time. Where would a cheap weapons shop and the administrative building be? I want to go to those places but..."

After answering with a comparatively, slightly less husky voice, the girl inclined her head in confusion.

"The administration building? What are you going there for?"

"Well... To register for the battle royale event happening soon..."

The moment she heard that, the girl's big eyes grew wide and started blinking with surprise.

"Uh...uhhhh, even though you just started today? Well, there is nothing about who can or can't register for the event, but your level is probably not sufficient..."

"Ah, this isn't an initial character. It was converted from another game...."

"Wow, so that's how it is."

The girl's indigo blue eyes momentarily flashed, and this time, her mouth rose up in a clear smile.

"Is it alright if I ask? Why did you decide to come to this game that's full of dust and reeks of oil?"

"That is... Uhh, until now, I've always been playing just fantasy games but, I thought once in a while, I should try a cyber-like game... Something like a gun battle seemed interesting."

Well, this wasn't exactly a lie. How far the VRMMO sense of someone like me who specializes in fighting with swords can go in GGO somewhat interests me.

"I see. That's why you suddenly want to attend the BoB. You've got guts."

The girl, after a laugh, nodded.

"Alright, I'll show you around. It just so happens that I'm also going to the administration building. Before that is the gun shop right? Is there a gun that you like?"

"Uh, well..."

Even though she said it, nothing immediately came to mind. After I couldn't come up with an answer, she smiled again.

"Well then, let's go to a market with many different types. This way."

Immediately turning around, I frantically chased after the tail of the scarf worn by the girl who had already started to walk.

We walked through winding paths, walkways, alleys, and staircases from one to another that I thought were impossible to remember and after walking a number of minutes, we reached the main street that the path had opened up onto. Positively, I saw a dazzling shop that I thought was a major company's foreign investment group.

"Over there."

She smoothly wove her way through the crowd and approached the shop.

The large interior of the shop was full of various colored lights and noises that it was like an amusement park. The NPC clerks were all beautiful women scantily clad in large silver costumes and lavishing an innocent business smile, but what was shocking was what they were all holding and what was adorning every wall. Shining with a black light, they were all hand guns and machine guns and the like.

"It's... It's certainly an interesting store."

After saying so, the girl next to me also let out a wry smile.

"Truthfully, rather than at the overall shops aimed at beginners, you can find better bargains at the more specialized shops. But anyway, if we can find the gun type that you like, then that's fine too."

Even if she said so, there were many players wearing flashy colored clothes loitering around the inside of the shop, who, compared to the desert color of this girl, gave off the feeling of being beginners.

"Now then, what kind of player are you?"

After being asked, I immediately thought about it. Due to converting from the other world, the tendency of the character's abilities would have been brought over.

"Umm, main focus is strength and then speed... I guess?"

"A strength-agility type huh. Then, probably the type who carries a heavy assault rifle or a large diameter machine gun for the main arm and a handgun for a sidearm would be good... but, you just converted right? Then, money is..."

"Oh... right"

In a flash, I shook my right hand and brought out my window. Even if my abilities were transferred by the convert, it couldn't transfer over items and money. Therefore, the amount of money shown at the bottom of the storage column was—

"Um... 1000 credits."

"...So the initial amount."

When our gazes met, I was met with a troubled smile.

"Yeah..."

Her expression returning, the girl touched her thin lips with her fingertip and inclined her head.

"...With that amount of money, you probably can't buy anything more than a small ray gun... for a live ammunition gun, a second hand revolver... what to do... umm, if it's okay..."

Guessing what she was trying to say, I hurriedly shook my head. No matter what MMO, a newbie who receives too much help from a veteran cannot be praised. I didn't come to this game to have fun but, even so, as a gamer, there is a line that I cannot cross.

"No, it's okay. You don't have to do that. Um... Is there somewhere where I can make some money fast? If I'm not mistaken, I heard that there was a casino in this game..."

The girl, as expected, showed a smile that was slightly amazed.

"For such places like that, it would be better if you have an excess amount of money. That said, around here, there are both small and big ones. If I remember correctly, in this store..."

Pivoting her head, she pointed to the inside of the shop.

"There's a similar kind of gambling game. Look."

Looking closer, it was a large walled off area that, in terms of game machines, was an excessively large substitute.

It was roughly 3 meters wide and 20 meters long. Laid out on metal tiles, surrounded by a waist high fence, an NPC dressed with a gunman butt strap was standing the furthest inside. At the front, instead of a fence, there was a metal closure bar where I could see a square cashier-like pillar.

Behind the gunman, who would sometimes draw his handgun from the holster on his hip, twirl it around with the end of his finger, on the brick wall with countless bullet holes etched into it, at the top, there was a pink neon sign with the word "Untouchable".

"...This is?"

After I asked, the girl, while shifting her finger, explained it to me.

"It's a game where you enter the gate in front of you and while avoiding the gunfire of the NPC inside, you try to see how close you can approach. The highest score until now is, look over there."

Where her index finger was extended and pointing to, in the inner part of the fence on the floor, there was a thin, red, luminescent line. It slightly exceeded two-thirds of the entire area.

"Wow, how much can you receive?"

"Um, it costs 500 credits to play and you get 1000 if you break through ten meters, and 2000 for fifteen meters. And if you can somehow touch the gunman, you get all of the money that players have poured in up until now."

"All, all of it!?"

"Look, the sign indicates that there is a carry over. 1, 10, around 300,000 huh."

"That... That's an incredible amount of money."

"But it's impossible."

The girl immediately replied and shrugged her shoulders.

"That gunman, once you cross the eight meter line, will respond with cheating quick draws. Even though it's a revolver, with an unreasonable

high speed reload, it does a 3-round burst fire. By the time you can see the prediction line, it's already too late."

"Prediction line..."

At that time, the girl pulled my sleeve and with a small voice, whispered.

"Look, there is someone who will increase the sum again."

Returning my eyes from the gunman to the entrance, a three-person group of guys were approaching it.

In that group, one person, the guy who was wearing a military jacket apparently intended for use in cold areas with a gray on white camouflage, stood in front of the gate while psyching himself up. He pushed on the top portion of the cashier panel with the palm of his right hand, and with just that, the fare was paid and exceptionally lively fanfare resounded. All at once, from here and there, a gallery of around 10 people gathered.

The NPC gunman shouted a "Let's knock this bastard's ass up to the moon!"—like slang, and brought his right hand to the holster holding his gun. In front of the cold camouflaged male, a green hologram indicating a large number {3} materialized, with a sound effect accompanying the decrease to 2, 1 and at the same time as it reached 0, the metal bar at the gate opened.

"Nuuuuuuooooooooorrrryyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

The cold district guy, while raising a war cry, dashed a few steps or so I thought, and spread out both legs and did an emergency stop. He opened his eyes completely, and suddenly, bent his upper body to the right, raised his left hand and right foot in a strange posture.

'What kind of dance is that?', is what I thought and at that moment, bullets, shining brightly red, passed through the space ten centimeters to the left of the cold district guy's head, under the left armpit, and under the left knee. The NPC gunman had pulled his gun from his holster and fired three shots in a row. It was a splendid evasion but it was like the cold district guy seemed to understand the course that the bullet traveled through.

"...Just now, that was the trajectory...?"

I whispered, turning my head and the girl with the water colored hair nodded, and replied with the same low voice.

"That's right. Evasion by means of «Trajectory Perception»."

The cold district guy ferociously dashed again right as the firing line disappeared and again, halted immediately. This time, he spread both legs wide and bent his upper body ninety degrees.

Immediately, along with a high-pitched growl, two bullets passed above his head and one below his crotch. Forward again and then halting. It was like a game of «Red Light/ Green Light»

The cold district guy showed quick movements, and all at once, he had advanced seven meters. At that moment, I thought, 'another three meters and he can get back twice the amount he used to play.'

Up until now, the NPC, who has been rapidly firing three shots steadily in the same interval, unloaded the bullets with a lag between the first two bullets and the third bullet. The cold district guy avoided the bullet that flew late with a jump but, with the landing, he destroyed his balance and one hand approached the ground. When he tried to stand up in a rush, it was already too late. The gunman's right hand flashed and the emitted firing line scattered orange colored sparks on the guy's white vest.

A miserable fanfare played. The gunman shouted out abusive victory words and the pool money display in the background, accompanied by a small metallic sound, rose by five-hundred credits. The cold district guy dropped his shoulders, and dejectedly walked out of the gate.

"...so?"

The girl next to me, while slightly smiling under her scarf, shrugged her shoulders.

"Because you definitely can't move in a straight line, you can only move largely to the left and right and whatever you try, that is the limit."

"Hmm...I see. When you can see the perception line, it's already too late."

While I was muttering, I was moving my legs forward and approaching the gate.

"Wait... Wait a sec, you..."

To the girl with wide eyes trying to stop me, I returned a light smile and pushed my right hand on the cashier.

I heard a sound like an old style register. A lively sound reverberated.

Perhaps because of the appearance of another fool or perhaps due to my own appearance, the audience and the three man group grew astir. The girl with the scarf put both hands on her hips and was shaking her head slightly with a fed up expression.

At the same time as the gunman's abusive voice that was different from earlier, the countdown started right in front of my eyes.

I lowered my waist and took the posture for a full power dash. The number decreased and the moment the metal bar opened, I kicked off and jumped onto the floor.

While advancing a few steps, the gunman quickly raised his right hand and from the tip of the tightly held gun, three red lines extended. They were pointing at my head, the right side of my chest, and my left leg.

—The moment I felt this, with all of my strength, I jumped forward to the right. Immediately after, an orange firing line passed through to the left of my body. Right away, I kicked off the panel with my right leg and returned to the center.

Of course, inside a VRMMO game, this was my first time confronting a gun.

However, in ALO and SAO, there are many monsters that attack from long range with bows and arrows, venom, and magic. There is one way to avoid the trajectory of those attacks and that is to read the shooting line from the enemy's eyes. Probably due to the developer Kayaba Akihiro's fixation on details, the behavior of the monsters in VRMMO's based on the cardinal system were all given the characteristic of pointing their sight at the targeted point without any deviation.

The NPC who was pointing his gun at me at this moment was also probably not exempt from this rule.



I stared at nothing but the gunman's eyes, not even looking at the red trajectory perception line or even at the black muzzle. From the lifeless, twitching movements, I grasped the hint of the trajectory that the bullet will fly, and at the same time, just barely moving to the left or the right, and possibly up or down, and avoiding the soundless indicated perception line itself. In fact, when the bullet passed through, I was already entering the stance before the next dash.

When I had avoided two sets of three-burst attacks, it seemed that I had passed the ten meter mark and a short sound effect sounded. However, that sound nearly didn't reach me.

The gunman released the cylinder that had become empty after shooting six bullets and at the same time as he hurled the empty cartridge behind his back, with his left hand, he fully loaded the gun with six bullets. The entire series of operations took half a second—truly a cheat-ish quick draw—to pull off before again being pointed towards me.

The next attack was not the clear cut three-shot rapid-fire up until now. More than half of it due to intuition, I avoided the irregular rhythm of two, one and then three bullets and moved five meters. Again, there was a short fanfare. At the same time was the gunman's lightning fast half second reload.

The remaining distance was five meters and I was already in front of the enemy. It might have been my imagination but I could clearly see the bearded face distort into a loathsome expression.

Under the ten gallon hat, the black eyes quivered a little and moved down to the same level as my chest. Deciding that avoiding to the left or right was impossible, I threw my body down, sliding on the metal tile. I passed under the six firing lines that were released like a machine gun and reached two and a half meters remaining.

With this, the enemy had no more bullets again. Even if there was a half second gap to reload once more, it was enough for a touchdown.

While rising, what I thought was that I saw the gunman's eyes broadly grinning. At least, that was what I felt.

On reflex, I changed the intention of my last dash and jumped up with all of my might.

Without any reload, six laser beams from the revolver passed through the space where I was standing just before.

While screaming 'What the hell was that!' inside my mouth, I spun a complete rotation and landed in front of the gunman.

Here, I wanted to shout out something cool but, before any further trump cards are used, like a beam coming from his eyes, I should decide the match, so I quickly leapt at the leather wearing opponent's chest.

After a moment of silence as if the sounds in the shop had disappeared.

"YOU ACTUALLY....!!!"

Along with that grandiose shout, the gunman collapsed onto the floor onto his knees holding his head with both hands. At the same time, there was a storm of disorderly fanfare.

A collapsing sound resounded, and raising my head to it, the brick wall behind the gunman collapsed as if it exploded from within. Without losing any time for surprise, a rain of all of the goods roughly flowed out from inside. It sprang back up at my feet and as a good sound came from it, it disappeared.

Underneath the neon sign, the digital numbers of the carry-over sum hectically decreased and before long, it became zero and at the same time, the money colored waterfall also stopped. A noticeably noisy sound echoed from inside the shop as the game was reset and the gunman, too, rose up and started to spin his hand gun around his fingertip. As usual, he started to yell out provocative slang but after the cheatingly extreme display of 12 rapid-fire shots earlier, it was doubtful if anyone who decides to challenge him will appear.

"...fuu"

I let out a breath and escaped the game lane from the exit on the left side.

At that moment, from the audience of people that had multiplied at some point, a swirl of commotion sprang forth. Voices saying things like 'what was that earlier', 'who is that person' mingled together.

From the edge of the crowd of people, the girl with the water colored hair, half-jogging, rushed over to me and with both eyes unintentionally wide open like a cat, stared at me. After a few seconds, a jumbled and cracked voice flowed out from her lips.

"... You, what kind of reflexes do you have...? That last moment, in front of my eyes... You avoided the laser beams from two meters away... Even though, at that range, there's already nearly no time lag between the bullet path prediction line and the actual fire..."

"Uh, ummm... that's because..."

I hesitated for a short moment as to how to answer and in the end, said.

"That's because, this bullet avoiding game is a game to predict the bullet path prediction line isn't it?"

"Pre...Predict the prediction line!?"

The girl's cute scream traveled through the air inside the shop. All of the audience also opened their mouths and fell silent.

.....

After a few minutes, finally, at the point when the crowd had broken up into small groups, I was twisting my neck here and there to see the rifles inside the showcases.

"Umm... Even though the caliber is smaller than the submachine gun, why is this assault rifle bigger?"

I tried the simple question on the kindhearted girl standing next to me, but it seemed like she still hadn't cooled down from the lingering effects of the shock, and like a cat that saw something it doesn't usually see, she was staring at me with eyes mixed with caution and curiosity.

"... You don't even know something like that and you have such an unthinkable evasion skill... You said you converted right? What kind of game were you in before?"

"Uh, umm... I was always in a fantasy type game..."

"I see... Well, whatever. If you're entering the BoB preliminaries, there's an opportunity to show me how you actually fight. Now, what was it, the reason the assault rifle has a small caliber? That started from America's M16, with the high-speed small diameter bullet design concept based on accuracy and an emphasis on penetrating power..."

At that point, abruptly closing her mouth, the girl frowned as if she felt bitterness from her own words. But that strange reaction also disappeared in a moment and right away, a more temperate smile took its place.

"... That kind of thing doesn't matter does it? Now, let's hurry up and finish your shopping."

"Ri...Right. Let's go."

While I was doubtfully nodding, she turned her sight from me and started to slowly walk in front of a large showcase.

"Having earned more than 300K, I think you can buy a pretty good one but... because it comes down to what the person likes and is committed to in the end, the first thing is to know that."

"Committed to...?"

I followed after the girl and looked around at all of the gleaming black guns but, no 'ping' would come. That was natural, as in terms of my knowledge about guns, it ended at 'for handguns, there are revolvers and automatics'.

While groaning, before I knew it, we had reached the end of the display cases that were lined up inside the shop without any gaps. Since it's come to this, I'll leave it up to the girl to decide—— is what I thought when something strange entered my field of vision.

In the corner of a long showcase, something that was clearly different from a gun, a few metal, tube-like objects were lined up.

They were three centimeters in diameter and around twenty-five centimeters long. On one side, a metal fixture like a mountaineering carabiner hung down, on the other side was slightly thicker and in the center, there was a black hole like some kind of discharge opening.

"Umm... What is this?"

Hearing me, the girl gave a fleeting glance and shrugged as if there was a kink in her shoulders.

"Ah... That is a 'Kouken'."

"Ko-Kouken?"

"Sword of light, written as 'kouken'. The actual name is «Photon Sword» but everyone usually calls it 'Laser Blade' or 'Light Saber' or 'Beam Sabre'."

"Sw-Sword!? In this world, there is a sword?"

I rushed up to the showcase. Now that she mentions it, it strongly resembles the weapon in an old science fiction movie that the knights who protect the order of the universe wielded.

"There is but, in all practicality, there's no one who uses it."

"Wh... Why not?"

"Well, that is because, if you don't cross over into close-range, you can't hit, and to get that close, without a doubt, you'll become like a honeycomb..."

The girl stopped her words there and with her lips slightly open, stared at me.

Almost grinning, I just smiled and responded.

"In other words, it's alright as long as I can get close, right?"

"Bu-But, even though your evasion skills are amazing, against a full auto gun... ah."

While the girl had not yet finished speaking, with my finger, I pressed on the one with a metallic black hue coating that I liked. I selected [BUY] from the choices in the popup menu that appeared and with great speed, an NPC salesperson rushed over and with a smile, presented a metallic panel like object. I realized that the green surface scanner in the middle of the board was the same as the cashier in the earlier game and pushed on it with my right palm.

The sound effect of the cash register chimed happily, and the panel showed a black photon sword appearing with a *fuun* sound effect. I took it, and the shop attendant said 'thank you for your patronage~' and bowed before returning back to its position.

"...Ahh, I bought it."

The girl glanced over me from 45 degrees to the right and said this,

"Of course, everyone has their own personal fighting style."

"Yeah. If it's sold, it means that it can definitely be used, even if it's this."

I answered as I used my right hand to hold tightly onto the short cylinder shaped weapon, and then brought it right in front of it. I used my thumb to press the switch, and with a low *Guun*, a purplish-blue energy blade vibrated out as it reached out with a length of about 1 meter, lighting the entire place.

"Oohh."

I couldn't help but simply call it. I had already wielded swords of different sizes up till now, but this is the first time the blade I'm wielding is made of pure light.

I stared at it for a while, and found that the sword itself didn't have any direction as the entire circular section was just like a long and thin cylinder. I tried to swing in a horizontal manner, and then used the one-handed sword skill I was familiar with in SAO even without the system assisting, the 'Vertical Square'.

Bu-n, *buon*, the light saber let out a delightful sound as it sliced out into the air in complicated trajectories before finally stopping. Of course, my hand didn't feel any resistance because of the weight of the sword.

"Heh—"

The girl clapped a few times beside me and showed a shocked look.

"You really looked like the real deal there. Is that a skill from a fantasy world...? Looks like I can't underestimate you, huh?"

"No, not really... but this is really light."

"Of course. This weapon has no other advantages other than being light. Alright— If you want to use that as your main weapon, it's better to have an SMG or a handgun as your sidearms. You have to restrain your opponent if you want to close in."

"...I see. That's true."

"How much do you have left?"

I called out the window. My 300,000 credits had dropped to 150,000 credits. I said out the amount, and the girl blinked before shrugging.

"Uhe, so a light saber is so expensive? 150K left... You have to have money to buy bullets and protective gear. Looks like you can only buy a handgun."

"I'll leave the rest to you then."

"If you want to take part in BoB, it's better to have a powerful weapon... If you want to hold the enemy off, it should be more important to take accuracy over power...hm..."

The girl coughed dryly as she slowly moved towards a shelf with a pile of handguns over there. Finally, she pointed at one of them and said,

"You'll run out of money like this, but this «FN Five-Seven» should be good."

Her slender finger pointed at a small automatic handgun with a smooth round grip.

"Five...seven?"

"It refers to the caliber. It's 5.7mm, and a little smaller than the normal 9mm Parabellum bullet, but the shape is similar to a sniper bullet, so the accuracy and piercing ability are rather good. It's a unique bullet, so it can only be shared with the assault rifle «P90» that was also made by FN, but I guess it's alright since you only have this gun..."

"I-I see..."

On hearing such an unrestrained explanation from her, I again felt a slight interest in this girl with light blue hair.

GGO is a game where the gender is fixed, so she should definitely be a girl in real life, but I really couldn't tell her race and age. What I could tell from my gut feeling is that her age should be about the same as me.

Since we're playing this MMORPG, it's natural to be familiar with the items in the game. It's like when Asuna and Lyfa were mentioning the swords and magic in ALO. It wouldn't end without talking for 50 minutes.

But— for some reason, I feel that the 'gun' and those things were completely different. Also, I heard that most of the guns that appeared in GGO were weapons that existed in real life. Also, this kind of weapon would easily make one think about bloodshed and killing. This girl who's of the same age as me would actually dive into such a world, and continue to

fight until she becomes a veteran player that understood all the guns. I'm rather interested in her motivation and driving force to play this game...

"Oi, are you listening?"

"Ah, ye-yeah."

I hurriedly interrupted my thoughts and nodded my head.

"I'll buy this then. Is there any other thing that I should buy?"

I bought the «Five-Seven» pistol she recommended, no, the handgun, and also bought pre-prepared bullet magazines, a thick bulletproof jacket, a belt-type «Optical gun shielding Field» and other small equipment. Once I finished my purchase, the 300,000 credits I earned in the dodging game went up in smoke.

I felt the weight of the light saber on my right waist and the «Five Seven» on my left waist as I walked out of the shop, and once I went outside, I found that the sunset sky was gradually reddening.

"Sorry to delay you for so long. Thank you very much."

I lowered my head and said my thanks. The girl smiled under the muffler and shook her head before saying,

"No, I didn't really have anything to do before the preliminaries...Ah."

The girl stopped midway through as she spoke, and hurriedly looked over at the large and thick chronometer on her left hand.

"Damn it. The registration closes at 3. Wah, I might not be able to make it even if I rush over to the presidential villa..."

"Eh, you're going to register now too?"

"Yeah."

Having been affected by this girl who's giving a pale look, I looked over at the digital watch I just bought. The time over there showed— 14:51.

I looked up and frantically asked,

"The-Then, isn't there any teleport movement skill or something like that? Like a transport item or spell or some superpower or something!?"

"I'll tell you as we run!"

After shouting that, the girl hurriedly turned around and ran over to the north side of the road. I hurriedly followed that swaying muffler and spent a few seconds to catch up to her. She glanced over at me and said with an anxious voice,

"...There's only one kind of instant movement in GGO. That's when you revive after you die. The revival area in Gurokken is at the Presidential villa, but the HP definitely won't decrease on the streets, so we can't use that technique..."

We dashed straight down the street where NPCs and players were, and the girl continued to explain to me from time to time. Also, I had to use my entire effort just to catch up to her. I couldn't get used to the visual line that's weaker than ALO, and she was really running very fast. It's more of her refined movements than the support of her ability, and I could tell that she was completely used to movement after she dived.

The girl again looked at the watch in her hand and pointed at the street in front before saying,

"...The presidential villa's over there. It's at the north end of the street, so there's still 3km. it'll take about 5 minutes to operate the registration machine, so if we don't reach within three minutes...!"

I looked over at the main street that was extended out, and found that there was a large tower that was giving off red light because of the sunset. It was a straight path, but even if we run at a speed of 1km/min while dodging people, it would be very tough in the VR world even if we can't pant.

If I can't register in time, it'll be because I didn't do my investigations properly, but if the light blue-haired girl beside me didn't help me, she could have done the job easily. Feeling somewhat guilty, I glanced over at her and saw her gritting her teeth. The side of her face was showing desperation, and a slight voice came with the virtual breathing sound could be heard.

"...Please...Please, got to make it..."

—I suppose that to this girl, the preliminaries of the 'Bullet of Bullets' that's about to happen shouldn't be just a game, but something with a huge meaning behind it. There must be a reason why she had to take part in this tournament...

After I instinctively realized this, I hurriedly looked around, hoping to find a way to get to the presidential villa that's far away within 3 minutes.

At this moment, an advert billboard appeared in my eyes.

On the wide land on the left, there was parking space that expanded after a while. There were 3 mini vehicles that were colored red, yellow and blue, and deep inside at the upright panel, there were words «Rent-A-Buggy!» on a Neon Sign. Of course, I immediately knew what that meant.

"...That's the one!"

I hurriedly grabbed the left hand of the girl and started to change direction. The girl let out an 'eh!?' in shock, and nearly floated up as I grabbed her, but we still moved through the pedestrians and rushed into the carpark with the «Rent-A-Buggy!» sign.

The vehicles that were lined up inside were all buggies, each having a wheel at the front and 2 wheels at the back. I tossed the girl into the red buggy that's parked in front of me and leaped onto the front seat. I found a fingerprint scanner under the meter panel that was similar to the one when I was shopping, put my right hand on it, and the engine immediately started with the sound of a checkout.

Luckily, the front part of the buggy was exactly the same as the motorbike, and it was fully manual. I gripped hard on the handle and pushed the throttle valve without saying anything. The ignition switch inside let out a roar, and the front wheel of the buggy rose up before shooting onto the lane like a bullet.

"KYAH...!"

I heard a cute cry from the back seat, and two slender arms were wrapped around my waist.

"Hang on tight!"

Though it might be too late for it, I cried that out, and after a right turn where the wheels practically scorched the road surface, I threw the acceleration to the max right as we got on the road. After shifting gears up several times, the meter finally crossed 100km. I truly felt glad that I wasn't riding on an electric scooter but an old bike with manual gear selection in the real world.

As I continued to dodge the incoming four-wheelers of the future on the street, I continued to switch gears, and heard the girl shout out into my right ear,

"W...Why!? This buggy is really hard to handle. There aren't even that many male players who can drive it well...!"

—Sorry, but I'm one of those male players that are the exception.

But in such a situation, of course I couldn't say the truth, so I could only vaguely hide it and say,

"No...not really, I played a race-type game before... Woah!"

The large bus in front suddenly changed lanes, and I could only use the rear wheels to glide fully to dodge it. After lowering gears, I again accelerated before moving past it. In fact, in the age where the year 2025 is about to end, it's logical that not many people had the experience of riding on an old-fashioned manual bike. In the first place, the standard for practice at training institutes was electric scooters. I got my bike because an acquaintance of Agil was willing to hand it over to me for free, which was why I worked so hard to get that medium license that allowed manual vehicles. However, a while after collecting that bike that's made from Thailand, I noticed that it was meant to save the owner's money so that he didn't have to scrap it. That's because it's said that vehicles with gas engines will not be allowed in a few years...

—As I thought about this, laughter suddenly came from behind, and I was shocked as a result.

"Ahaha...this is great. So nice!"

I spent a lot of time only to realize that this voice belonged to that cat-eyed girl. It's unexpected of a girl who's somewhat tense and lonely to let out such laughter.

"Hey, come on...faster!"

After hearing the girl's voice, I glanced over at the large presidential villa that was 1km away, and answered 'OK!'. I lowered my head and got the gear on the foot lever to the maximum. The engine let out a *KA-A-A-A-A-A-AN* roar, and the speedometer showed about 200km.

At this speed, it'll only take about several seconds to cover 1km.

But the cheers this girl made during this short time left a deep impression in me.

At the staircase leading to the wide stairs of the presidential villa, I parked the buggy in a parallel manner and stopped.

I looked at my watch, and there's still slightly more than 5 minutes till 3.

"We'll be able to make it! This way!"

The girl who leaped off from the rear step grabbed my right hand and continued running. The side of her face reverted back to showing a sharp expression that was like a sharp blade— no, like a high powered machine gun. I forced myself not to think which side of her was her real side and continued climbing the stairs.

After climbing about 20 steps, an abnormally large tower stood in front of me. It had a long and narrow streamlined-looking plaza on both sides, and I could see a round disk that looks like an antenna or radar plate.

"This is the presidential villa, commonly called the bridge. The place where you started the game from is the «Memorial Hall», and it's on the other side."

The girl pulled my hand as she said so.

"Bridge? Crossing bridge...?"

I asked, and the girl tilted her head slightly and answered,

"Not a crossing bridge, but a 'navigation bridge', I suppose? Gurrokken is the command post of a spaceship, so it had such a name."

"Spaceship...ahh, so that's why this city is long."

"Yeah. The actual name is «SBC» or «Space Battle Cruiser» for short. Registrations for participation or anything related to the game are held here."

As she explained till here, we just happened to pass by the large tower, the first level entrance of the bridge.

Inside it was a rather spacious round hall.

The round pillar that was lined up in a cross shape extended up to the roof, and it looked rather futuristic. On the surrounding wall, there were large flatscreens that were all around, showing advertisements about all sorts of activities and real life enterprises as they showered down primary colors. Of course, the brightest of them all was the promotional video of the «3rd Bullet of Bullets».

But right now, I didn't have the time to enjoy this as the girl pulled me and continued to move into a corner deep into the right.

There were several long machines beside the wall, and they looked like ATMs in a convenience store or a multimedia platform.

The girl brought me in front of a machine and quickly said,

"Register here. It's just like a normal touchscreen. Do you know how to use it?"

"Haa, I'll give it a shot."

"OK, I'll register over there. If there's something you don't understand, ask me."

After saying that, the girl moved forward towards the neighboring machine that was separated by a board.

The main screen showed the words «SBC Gurokken Presidential Villa», and what was shocking was that all the words inside were all converted to Japanese. Before diving, I checked through the official website of GGO in the real world through the internet, and was really troubled that the words were all in English. However, it seemed that the game itself was somewhat localized to some extent.

I used my fingertips to scroll down the menu, and immediately found the button to register for the third Bullet of Bullets. Of course, I immediately pressed on it, and the image immediately showed a form where I had to input my name, occupation and all sorts of particulars. There's still 180 seconds left.

Since it's a game, at least the character's name would be automatically entered, and also, what's my occupation and such...I continued to grumble as I looked at the form, but I immediately found the most shocking blank.

It was written 'In the following blank, please fill in your real world name and address. Of course, you can take part in this activity by leaving this space

blank or entering a fake address, but you won't be able to get the top few prizes."

This caused my fingers to immediately stop. My main aim was to reveal myself as much as possible in the tournament and let myself be «Death Gun»'s target, the term «prize» caused my soul as an MMO gamer to hesitate. That's because the prizes at this moment would be rare equipment that normally couldn't be obtained in game.

As my finger was attracted over by the name panel and got ready to enter the 'K' in 'Kirigaya' on the hologram keyboard, I finally forced myself not to do so.

I didn't come here to play. My priority is to meet with this mysterious player «Death Gun» and decide whether his ability is real or fake. If «Death Gun» really had such an ability, it wouldn't be smart to reveal my real particulars in the game. I couldn't deny the possibility that «Death Gun» was someone inside the operating company, and that there's a possibility that he could read all the log in records of all the players.

I finally shook off the allure of the rare prize, and the bleeding heart in me left everything blank before hitting the submit button at the bottom most part.

The screen changed again, and a paragraph of text showed that I had registered successfully, and then showed the time for the first round of the prelims. Unexpectedly, the day was today— 30 minutes from now.

"Are you done?"

The girl with aquablue hair suddenly asked from beside me. It seemed that she had finished her registration successfully. Thus, I relaxed and nodded my head.

"Yeah, finally completed. Thank you very much...and...sorry for making so much trouble for you."

After hearing me apologize, the girl smiled.

"It's alright. I was rather happy during the ride on the buggy just now. Speaking of which, which group are you in?"

"Umm..."

I again looked back at the screen and answered,

"I'm Group F. Group F, number 37."

"Ah...I see. We registered at the same time, so I'm group F too. I'm number 12 too...that's great, even if we meet in the finals."

"Why do you say that?"

"If we can enter the finals of the preliminaries, we can enter the battle royale in the finals no matter whether we win or lose. It's likely that both of us can get the right to take part in the battle royale. However, if we really meet in the finals of the preliminaries..."

Those cat like eyes of hers shone, and then she spoke,

"I won't hold back."

"Ahh...I see. If we meet, I'll definitely do my best."

I smiled and answered before switching the screen back to the main screen. Then, I asked a question,

"Speaking of which, it's a foreign game, but the machines here are all localized to Japanese already. The official website was in English..."

"Ahh... The operating company, «Zasker», is an American company, but there seemed to be Japanese amongst the people working on the Japanese Server. But...you should know that whether it's Japan or America, GGO is in the grey area when it comes to the law."

"That's because of the «Money Trading System»."

After hearing my response, the girl gave a somewhat wry smile as she nodded her head.

"That's right. In a certain sense, this is a privately-run casino. Thus, the official website would only give the most basic information and not reveal where the operating company is. Also, things like character management, money conversion to an electronic bank account and all game related stuff could only be done in the game."

"All I can say is... This game really overdoes things."

"That's why this place could be said to be a completely different realm from the real world...but because of this, it feels that the me now and the me in reality are two completely different people..."

I felt that there was a shadow in the girl's eyes, and I blinked for a while, feeling puzzled.

"...?"

"It-It's nothing, sorry. We should be going to our preliminary's arena— it's just under this place. Are you ready?"

"Ehh."

I nodded my head, and the girl again held my hand and said 'over here' before moving deep into the first level hall of the presidential villa. There were a few elevators at the wall, and the girl's slender finger pressed the down button beside the elevator door on the most right.

The door immediately opened, and the girl moved in before pressing onto the button «B20F». It seemed that there's a lot of space to move up and down. My body really felt like it was descending and decelerating, and the door opened.

Once I saw the darkness outside the door— I immediately lost my breath.

It was a half-shaped dome that was as wide as the first level hall. There was very little light inside, only a few arc lights sealed in metal frames giving off a dim gloom.

The floor or the pillars were either giving off the black polish of the metal floor or the tea-green color of the wire mesh. The wall of the large dome had some crude tables, and the roof had lots of large hologram panels. But right now, the current images only showed complete darkness. There were only the words in crimson red 'BoB 3 Preliminary' and a countdown timer of approximately 28 minutes.

However, what made me nervous weren't these scenes and the metal-based BGM that bellowed out.

More accurately, I was rather uncomfortable with those black shadows that were gathered at the tables near the wall or those that were right beside the metal pillar— the presence they gave off.

We were in a game, but there wasn't anyone busy shouting about. They were either whispering to each other or standing around alone. I could tell that they were participants for the BoB preliminary that was about to begin, and I knew that they were already thoroughly used to this virtual world. Those are really veteran VRMMO players.

—No, in terms of the amount of time we dived in, I don't think anyone here would have dived in longer than me. I was logged in at all times during the two years, both two years ago and last year.

However, each player had their own «Play Style». Like for me, I specialize in P v E, and they were players who were of the complete opposite from me. They were guys who were passionate about P v P. From the sharp glances they gave from the helmets that didn't have any glow of the heavy headpiece, I knew that these people were desperately trying to get information about this.

I haven't really fought against players much, ever since ALO switched over to its current operating company in spring this year. During that far too long gap, I must have definitely lost touch in P v P, and how the stare these guys shot over at me felt so overwhelming was the proof of that.

—These guys, this job is getting more and more difficult, Kikuoka-san.

Unwittingly muttering this deep inside my heart, my right elbow was suddenly pushed. After looking aside, I found a girl with light blue hair giving a surprised look.

"...What's wrong?"

"No, nothing..."

After I hurriedly answered softly, the girl nodded her head slightly and whispered back,

"Let's head to the restroom first. You have to change into the battle clothes you bought just now anyway."

And then, she started to move around the players. Her feet were moving naturally, and I couldn't feel any tension from her. However, this wasn't because the people around us ignored her existence. The stares this group of guys shot at her were of so much battle intent that it couldn't be compared to their looks when they stared at me. A guy who placed a terrifyingly large machine gun even deliberately cleared his barrel loudly.

Unexpectedly, this girl had such amazing courage and could ignore such tremendous pressure. I felt even more shocked as I raced to catch up to that dirty-yellow muffler.

There weren't tables deep inside the dome, but rather, several icy cold metal doors were lined up over there. The girl opened a door with a green

light, led me in, closed the door behind me, and pressed on the operation panel on the inside of the door. With a clicking sound, the indicator changed to red.

There was a somewhat narrow changing room inside the door. Of course, there wasn't anyone else other than us.

"...Fuu."

After arriving at the center of the room, the girl breathed out slightly and then seemed to grumble,

"Really...such a bunch of naive guys..."

"Wha...nai-naive guys? Were you talking about those guys with tremendous killing intent?"

I recalled the faces of those guys who were frowning in the dome, and the girl seemed to treat it as a matter of fact as she nodded her head and said,

"That's right. Taking out their main weapons to brag 30 minutes before the tournament is basically asking other people to think of ways to deal with them."

"Ah...ahh...I see.."

"You better equip your light saber and the Five-Seven only before the tournament begins."

The girl smiled as she said this, and after seeing me nod my head slightly, she turned around.

Then, she did something that was much scarier than those words she said just now.

She waved her right hand and called out the main menu, and immediately clicked on it to remove all the equipment.

The dirty-yellow muffler, the curry colored jacket, the loose cargo pants and the patternless T-shirt were all gone in a systematic manner.



Right now, the girl was only wearing underwear that covered a small area and had its fibers showing a little gloss.

"U...uwaa!?"

I let out a hoarse voice and frantically used my right hand to cover my face. Then, through the gaps, I saw the girl's inexplicable look.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and change."

"O-Okay, errm, that..."

Even when facing the biggest shock ever since I dived into GGO, I continued to desperately think of countermeasures.

In this situation, there's not much choices I have. I could find an excuse to escape from this room, or I could continue and pretend to be a girl and put my equipment over my clothing. However, both methods would be fooling this girl who helped me out a lot.

In this desperate situation, I could only grit my teeth and make the third option before the girl does the ultimate tragedy of de-equipping herself.

I lowered my head at the fastest possible speed and let my name card materialize from the main menu before handing it over to the girl with both hands.

"Er, erm... Excuse me! I haven't introduced myself up till now... This is who, no, what I am!"

"Eh? Wha...What?"

I felt the namecard left my hand with a puzzled voice.

"Kiri...to. Fuun, that's an interesting name.....wait....."

I, Kirito, never joined any guilds, no, «squadron» in this world, so on my namecard, there's the name— and the gender only.

"Male..... Erm, eh.....!? But, you're, well....."

The dumbfounded voice came over, and at the top of my sight, with my head lowered straight down, I could see a cute little naked foot take a step back.

"This can't be.....a-a guy.....!? With such an avatar.....!?"

And then, there was silence.

I couldn't stand the tense atmosphere that surrounded this changing room and got ready to lift my head.

At this moment, a white object quickly flew over, and after exploding at the left side of my face, there was a purple flash effect.

I continued to spin around like a top due to the impact, realizing that it was the palm of the girl after collapsing onto the floor with stars.

"Don't follow me."

"Bu-But I don't know what to do next..."

"Don't follow me."

"Bu-But I don't know anyone else..."

"Don't follow me."

As we kept the volume of our conversation down, I continued to desperately chase after the aqua-blue haired girl in front of me.

Right now, she was wearing a desert colored military jacket, bulletproof armor that's of the same color and combat boots. The only thing that was the same as her street attire was that muffler on her neck. Just like the advice she told me, she didn't materialize her weapon.

My dress up was somewhat similar to hers, but mine was black clothing that was more suited for night camouflage. This time, I wanted to give up on my preference and choose a more vibrant color, but the battle venue was decided randomly, and the girl noted that my budget wouldn't allow me to buy colored clothing for all terrain, so I ended up choosing the color I liked the most.

And the person who gave me that suggestion just 1 meter away from me continued to walk on without looking back.

Of course, I could understand why she was so angry, but I didn't lie to say 'I'm a girl' or speak in a female's tone. It's my fault for taking advantage of her error, but if she actually told me when we were about to change, I would have responded to her...

I couldn't help but start to grumble in my heart as I somewhat deliberately tailed her from behind. However, the girl suddenly stopped. At this point, we had already gone around half the dome.

The girl turned around to look at me, who also stopped.

Her blue eyes were glaring at me. The icy expression was more like a leopard than a cat now. I thought that she would roar and shrink back as her small lips breathed hard, but she merely sighed quickly.

She sat down hard on a box seat at the side and then turned her face to another direction. I timidly sat opposite her.

I lifted my head and looked over at the full panel hologram screens, and found that there was less than 10 minutes till the start of the preliminaries. I didn't know what to do afterwards, whether I had to move somewhere once the preliminaries start or that I still need to go through some steps. I didn't even know where to get this information.

I could only timidly back my body away as it continued to fidget uneasily. At this moment, the girl glanced at me and sighed hard.

"...I will explain the basics at least. We're enemies after that."

After hearing her say that with a deep voice, I couldn't help but smile.

"Tha-Thank you."

"Don't be mistaken. I haven't forgiven you. Once the countdown at the top ends— all the participants here in this building will be automatically transferred to the first round arena where there's only you and your opponent."

"Fu, I see."

"The field is a 1km square space. The landscape, climate and time are all randomly generated. At the beginning, both players will be at least 500 meters away from each other, and the winner in that battle will be transferred over to the waiting area while the loser will be transferred to the hall in the first floor. The loser won't lose his weapons or drop things randomly, and if you win, you'll be immediately transferred to start the second round if the next round opponent's match was over. If the opponent's still battling, you have to wait until the battle ends. Group F has 64 people, so if you win 5 matches, you can enter the final round and also

get the right to enter the finals of this tournament. That's all for my explanation— I won't answer any more questions."

She sounded cold, but after her detailed explanation, I more or less understood what's with the preliminaries. I again thanked the girl.

"I think I got the gist of it. Thanks."

And then, she again glanced at me before she immediately looked away. The girl then opened her mouth and said softly,

"—You must make it to the finals. Since I taught you so much, I hope to teach you one last thing."

"Last thing?"

"I'll make you taste the bullet that will cause your loss."

After hearing such words, I couldn't help but smile. This wasn't a sarcastic smile or a forced one, but one that was from deep within me. I really like people with her personality.

"...I'm looking forward to that moment. But are you certain that you can make it to the finals?"

The girl snorted coldly and breathed,

"If I lose in the preliminaries, I'll quit for good. This time, I must definitely—"

It felt like she was staring at all the opponents as she let out a glass-colored shine.

"—Must kill off all the strong opponents."

These words were said under silent circumstances, but the slight soundwaves entered my ears. The girl's lips smirked as she showed a beast like smile. My back started to have chills that I never had for a long time.

It's no wonder that this girl wouldn't notice the pressure the other guys gave.

That's because she was a lot stronger than those guys. No matter whether it's the skill as a VRMMO player— or the mental strength that's supporting her.

The girl glanced over at me who held my breath and remained silent. The smile on her face disappeared. She seemed to be thinking about something as she stopped her gaze. Then, she used her right hand to summon the menu window. After some simple operations, a small card appeared in her fingertips.

The girl then let the card slide across the table, which I caught. She said, "This should be the last time we're talking like this, so I better announce my name. That's the name of the person who's going to defeat you—"

I silently looked over at the card. The word indicated on it was— «Sinon», and the gender was obviously female.

"Sinon..."

I muttered. The girl moved her aqua-blue hair and nodded slightly. I again reported my name.

"I'm Kirito. Nice to meet you."

I subconsciously reached my right hand out from over the table, but of course, the girl called Sinon ignored my action as she immediately turned her face away. I could only give a wry smile and pulled my hand back.

After that, Sinon kept her silence, and didn't seem like she intends to continue talking.

I looked at the large screen in the dome and knew that there was about 5 minutes left. At this moment, I started to hesitate over whether I should just hug my knees together and wait on the chair or just try and talk to her again. However, just when I was about to make my conclusion, I could hear footsteps heading towards Sinon.

I lifted my face and saw that there was a tall and large male player with long silver hair on his forehead walking straight to this table.

He was wearing a grey patterned streamlined camouflage that was slightly lighter than charcoal color, and there was a somewhat large machine gun that was slung over his shoulder— probably not a submachine gun or an assault rifle, and he had an intelligent looking face that fit his tall and skinny body. As he didn't look like he had much armor on him, it gave me the feeling that he was able to move about agilely on the battlefield. He looked more like a special ops member than a thoroughly experienced soldier.

The man didn't look at me while I was sitting silently in the corner as he smiled at Sinon. Immediately, what looked like a highly skilled avatar showed a boyish-like gentleness, which made me blink.

"Yaa, why are you so slow, Sinon? I was worried whether you were late."

On hearing that guy's tone that sounded like he was trying to act like an acquaintance, I thought that Sinon would definitely give him a death glare and cringed back. But unexpectedly, the icy presence around the girl immediately eased, and she even showed a slight smile.

"Hello, Spiegel. There was some accident, so I was delayed. Eh, but...don't you intend to show yourself?"

That man called Spiegel grinned awkwardly as he used his right hand to touch his hand.

"Well, I don't know whether you'll be bothered or not, but I came to cheer for you, Sinon. Besides, I can see the live telecast on the large screen."

It seemed that both of them were either friends or members of the same guild. Sinon moved her body away, and Spiegel naturally sat beside her.

"Speaking of which, what's that accident you mentioned?"

"Ahh...nothing much, just that I brought a certain person here and such..."

After Spiegel asked, Sinon immediately glanced at me with an icy expression. I reluctantly retracted my shortened neck back to shape, and the man who only noticed my presence now nodded his head.

"Hello, I'm that certain person..."

"Ah...he-hello. It's nice to meet you. Well...are you Sinon's friend?"

He didn't look like someone that's to be trifled with, but this man called Spiegel didn't seem to match his outwardly fierce look as he was rather polite. Or rather— Is he treating me like a girl now?

I tried to juggle around with my choice of words as I thought of how to answer this in a more humorous manner, but Sinon immediately shot out,

"Don't be fooled. He's a guy."

"Eh!?"

I could only use a normal tone to say my name at Spiegel, who widened his eyes.

"Ah— I'm called Kirito. I'm a guy alright."

"A-A guy... Eh, that means, erm..."

Spiegel gave a rather bothered expression as he looked back and forth from me to Sinon. It seemed that he couldn't understand why Sinon would go out with a male player.

Thinking that this was the case, I felt like teasing them, so I tried to add fuel to the fire as I said,

"Well, I was really taken care of well by Sinon, you know."

At this moment, Sinon immediately shot a bluish-lightning like glare at me and said viciously,

"Oi... Don't say that. I never took care of you at all. Speaking of which, when did I allow you to call me Sinon...?"

"Why are you saying that so mercilessly?"

"What about mercy here? You're just a stranger!"

"Eh— But didn't you help coordinate my equipment?"

"That...That's because, you..."

Just when we got to that point...

The slight BGM inside the dome gradually faded out, and what rang next was a fanfare of an electric guitar. After that, a sweet synthesized voice set at a loud volume blared above several hundred people's heads.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. We will now begin the preliminaries of the 3rd Bullet of Bullets tournament. All entered players will be automatically transferred to the field of the first round once the countdown reaches zero. At this moment, I shall wish you good luck."

A deafening applause and cheering rang inside the dome. *Katatata*, the sound of the machine guns being fired and the high pitched sound of lasers being fired was let out, and lights of different colors decorated the roof like fireworks.

Amidst all the ruckus, Sinon stood up and pointed her right index finger at me.

"You must get to the finals. Then I will blow your head."

I then stood up, grinned, and answered,

"If you want to go out on a date with me, I'll be glad to."

"You-You ba..."

The 20 second countdown timer was about to reach zero, and I waved my hand at Sinon before turning around and heading to the front to be transported to the field. At this moment, my eyes met Spiegel, who had been staring at me all this time.

His sharp eyes showed obvious wariness and hostility. Just when I felt that I may have gone overboard—

My body was surrounded by a pillar of blue light, and my sights immediately turned blue.

Finally, I was transported to a hexagonal panel that was floating in the darkness.

There was a light red hologram window in front of me, and on top of it were the large words «Kirito Vs Uemaru». Unlike SAO, which only allowed for English alphabets, it was possible to use Japanese in GGO. The name «Uemaru» was written in kanji, but of course, I had never met this guy before. Also, at the bottom of the window, there was a line of words «Preparation Time: 58 seconds left. Field: The Forgotten Old Monastery».

This minute of preparation should probably be to allow us to change into equipment that's suitable for this battle. I had no idea about my prepared weapons and maps, and I didn't even use them. I used my right hand to call out the menu, and in the equipment window that was similar to ALO, my main weapon was a «Kagemitsu G4» light saber, and my sidearm was a «Five-Seven». After checking whether I forgot to equip my defensive equipment, I closed the window.

As I waited for the time to slowly tick down, I suddenly had a strange thought.

That vicious smile shown for a moment by that girl called Sinon. It had the killing intent of a bullet, shot from a rifle, that could pierce through any shield or armor.

It made me remember that voice that resounded in my mind.

To eliminate the strong— this direct declaration sounded rather childish in a certain sense, but I never had such a chilling feeling, even including the time when I was in SAO. I felt her petite body let out a real will that far exceeded the roleplay in the game.

In this virtual world that's created through electric signals, I have not seen a player who showed such intense will like her. Amongst the female players, the only one I know who would go serious was Asuna. No— even when she's called «The Flash» or even «The Berserker» before that, she had never given me such an impression before.

Is it possible? Is that girl with light blue hair the «Death Gun» I'm looking for?

Kikuoka once let me hear the voice database of what's said to be «Death Gun»'s, but the screeching cry of metal rubbing against each other was completely different from Sinon's clear voice. However, GGO was just a world that was different from SAO. A player could have multiple characters, and there were many cases of logging in using different characters.

And from the sound of the tone, it seemed that Sinon had absolute confidence that she's able to make it to the finals. If my guess that Death Gun will definitely appear in this tournament is right, I can narrow them down to about 30 people, and of course, Sinon is one of them.

To be honest, I really don't want to test out this possibility. I didn't feel any killing intent from her, when she guided me to the shop and explained all sorts of things to me. Rather, she gave off a somewhat lonely feeling, like she wanted to get close to others.

Just which is the real Sinon, I wonder.

—No, I won't get the answer no matter how much I think. When our swords clash, no, when we both fire our guns, we should be able to get some clues.

Just when I thought about this and lifted my sights, the countdown timer reached zero, and my body was again surrounded by an effect.

After that, I was abandoned under a dim sunset sky.

The wind that blew beside me seemed to bring about a sharp whistle like sound. There were many layers of broken clouds floating above in the air, and below me, the wilted grass were all floating.

Beside me, there were large cylindrical pillars that were either of the Ionian or Corinth style. They were about 3m apart and lined in an arc shape. Some of the pillars were wrecked, and some of the pillars have completely collapsed. It just looked like the ruins of a lost civilization's temple.

I leaned my body on the closest pillar, and then quickly looked around at my surroundings.

The wide wilted grassland all around me was blowing around hard, and far away in the hills, I could see ruins that were similar to this place. According to Sinon's explanation, the field is a square, 1,000 meters wide, but to get from here to there would take about several kilometers. There should be some limiting boundary like a river or a cliff, or something like that.

I continued to remember her explanation. Right now, the opponent should be about 500 meters away from where I am now, but I couldn't see anyone in my sights. Like me, he should be hiding somewhere behind the ruins. There's no indication of the enemy around, so I have to find the enemy myself.

I can continue to wait here and let the enemy lose his patience before taking action. However, «waiting» really doesn't fit my personality. Instead of waiting here, I might as well run over to the closest ruin on the other side and use the gunshot of the enemy to quickly analyze my position...I thought as I used my left hand to feel the «Five-Seven» on my waist.

At this moment, a strong gust of wind blew by, and the surrounding grassland started to sway. As the gust stopped, the wilted grass again straightened...

And in the grassland about 20 meters away from my eyes, a profile suddenly stood up silently.

My blurred vision immediately saw the assault rifle the opponent whipped out, the tea-colored beard that was resting at the stalk of the gun, the goggles' lens that covered more than half the face and the helmet that had dummy grass on it. There's only me and my opponent in the battlefield, so he's definitely «Uemaru».

I had no idea when he shortened the distance between us at all. One of the obvious reasons was the camouflage suit he was wearing. That clothing looked similar to the surrounding grassland, and had slight streamlined patterns on it. Just when I thought I see, so that's the use of the 60 seconds...

The black assault rifle the enemy was readying on the right shoulder showed several red lines— «Bullet Line», and the lines were piercing through me and the space around me.

"UWAH!"

I couldn't help but cry out as I kicked the ground hard and moved to the place with the least bullet lines— up into the sky.

The enemy's rifle then went *katatatataatatata!!* And my right ankle got hit twice. The HP bar on the upper left corner of my sights showed a decrease of about 10%. Of course, I couldn't dodge all the bullets. At this moment, I remembered the «Full-Auto Shooting» Sinon warned me about.

I did a somersault in the air and landed on the half-broken pillar behind me. I tried to counter and drew the Five-Seven handgun from my belt with my left hand.

However, the enemy wouldn't give me time to aim at all. Immediately afterwards, numerous bullet lines appeared on my body again.

"WAAHHH!!!"

I let out an embarrassing scream as I rolled behind the pillar. Another bullet grazed my left wrist, and my HP dropped mercilessly.

The rain of bullets that descended on me seemed to hit the pillar, causing a *Bishibishibishi* sound and creating several fragments to fly out. I hurriedly cuddled my limbs together and hid my entire body behind the pillar.

—This is definitely different from a battle between swords!

In that dodging game against the NPC gunman, there was a time lapse and at most 6 bullets, but I already had to concentrate fully just to dodge those attacks. Now, when facing such a— barrage of more than 10 bullets in a second, of course I'm at my wits' end.

To slash Uemaru's bearded face with the light saber «Kagemitsu» on my right waist, I have to get right in front of him. But before that, I'll have bullets blown through me and my HP would be depleted already.

If I can't dodge them all, I can only think of a way to «defend» against the bullets. Unfortunately, even if there's a «protective field» in this world that can weaken the power of bullets, there isn't any magic shield or something that can protect against actual bullets. In SAO, there's the «Weapon Defense Skill» that can allow a sword to replace a shield....

At this moment, I suddenly put my hand on the light saber that's held on the carabiner under my belt. I just need to deflect a few bullets if I can defend with this saber. This shouldn't be impossible. Didn't someone in a SF movie use a light saber to easily deflect bullets? If this game is developed by an American company, they would be able to recreate this scene. But to do that really tough skill, I have to first predict the trajectories the bullets are fired at me...

No—

No, I can do this. I should be able to do this. Aren't the «Bullet Lines» telling me where the bullets are flying?

I swallowed my saliva and used my right hand to pull the light saber from my belt.

Right now, the gunfire stopped. I suppose Uemaru is again hidden amongst the grass and is ready to come over from the left or the right.

I closed my eyes and concentrated with my ears.

The wind continued to blow. At this moment, I tried my best to eliminate the noisy sound effects from my consciousness and concentrated on the rustling of the swaying grassland to hear for some irregular sound in this system.

This was a skill that could only be done in a VR space where I can isolate each sound completely. From the time of SAO, this «Outside-system Skill» helped me out a lot. For example, an S level ingredient «Ragout Rabbit» would require this skill to deal a fatal blow.

But as for whether I'm able to succeed or not—

And this moment, my ears caught an irregular sound coming from the rear left side from 7 o'clock to 9 o'clock. He moved for about 2, 3 seconds before stopping and started to probe my position.

The enemy then started to move, stop and got ready to move again...

"L...LET'S GO!"

I used my cry to step hard onto the ground and run straight where the enemy was hiding.

Uemaru probably didn't expect me to rush over at him while he was hiding in the bushes. As he stood up from the wilted grass, it took him about half a second to get down on one knee and get into his shooting position.

We were originally about 25m apart, but at this moment, I ran past half the distance. I continued to run as I used my right thumb to slide the photon sword's switch. *Bu~n*. The sound that made me relax could be heard, and a blueish-purple glowing blade came out from the sword handle.

For the third time, the numerous «Bullet Lines» that came from Uemaru's rifle appeared on my body.

Up till now, I had been instinctively looking for places where I could hide. But this time, I only let my eyes look right in front of my body and endured the fear that came from the back of my neck and irritated my senses. After trying my best to observe the enemy, I found that not all the thin red lines appeared at the same time. There's a little time difference between them, and the difference should be the order where the bullets would come out from the rifle barrel.

I controlled the body that was a lot more petite than in real life and rushed forward. At this moment, there were 6 Bullet Lines that were aimed on my body.

The other Bullet Lines on the left and right were all slightly off course. With the current distance, the enemy's rifle— and the shooter's accuracy himself wasn't much.

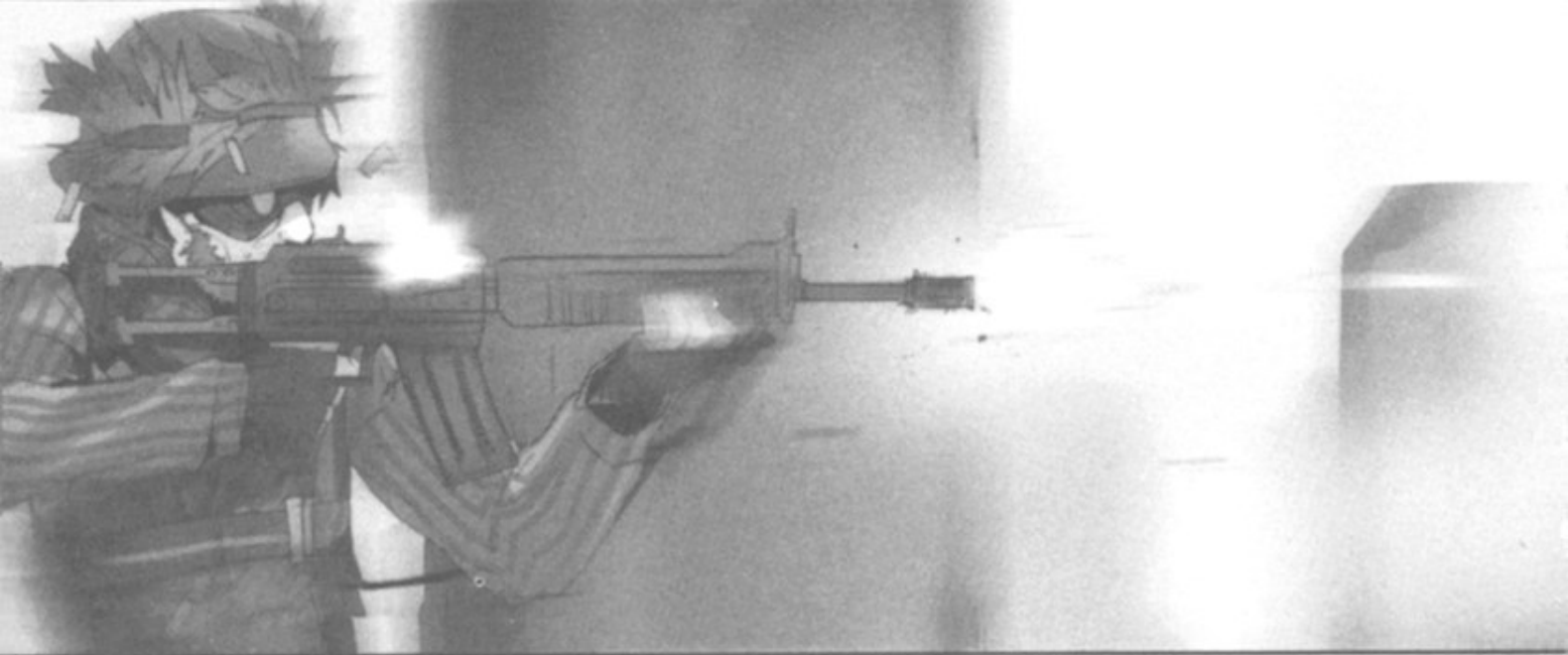
The long forgotten thrill of P v P seemed to have caused my character to shift into battle mode. As the remaining margin in my sights showed an outward extension from the center, the target's body was extremely obvious. It's this accelerating feeling that made me feel memorable. During

this time was when I started to slow down, my consciousness was the only thing racing.

The enemy's rifle's muzzle suddenly let out an orange spark.

During this time, the blade of the light saber blocked the lines of the first and second bullets with pinpoint accuracy.

BA-BAM!! The surface of the light saber let out two bright orange sparks. The moment I noticed this, my right arm immediately pointed the photon sword onto the third and fourth bullet lines at a lightning quick speed. Then, the sound of the bullets being deflected off the intense energy could be heard again.



I continued to move forward while ignoring the bullets that «wouldn't hit me at all». Actually, it was really a mentally draining thing, but I grit my teeth and continued to swing the sword in my hand.

5...and that's the 6th one! After deflecting all the bullets that could have hit me successfully, I kicked the ground hard with all I've got to cover the remaining distance between us.

"No...No way!"

Uemaru's thoroughly bearded jaw dropped as he widened his mouth and cried out in shock. However, this guy didn't stop at all. He ejected the magazine skillfully and drew out the prepared magazine on his waist and got ready to load it into the rifle.

To prevent him from doing this, I gripped the Five-Seven in my left hand and pointed it at Uemaru. The moment my fingers touched the trigger, a light green circle appeared at the center of the enemy's chest. This shocked me, but I just continued to shoot 5 bullets.

The unexpectedly light recoil went from the wrist to the shoulder, and inside the half-transparent circle, Uemaru was hit once in the shoulder and the abdomen as the remaining three shots disappeared behind him in the bushes. However, the bullets that hit him went through his armor and caused damage to him. The screen showed his HP gauge drop by about 10%. Uemaru staggered and immediately hesitated.

To me, this was enough time.

As I entered the attack range, I slightly twisted my body to the right—

Just when I stepped out at a speed as if I wanted to break through the virtual ground, I lunged forward without wasting any of the speed at all. In the world of SAO, it's called a «Vorpal Strike», a critical hit as it lunged into the enemy's chest.

The jet engine-like buzzing rang as the blade of light pierced through the enemy's body easily. It felt that the burst of energy that couldn't be vented anywhere else imploded inside the enemy.

Then, with an exaggerated light and sound, the cylinder-shaped thing in my right hand shot out, and the enemy's body became numerous fragments as it scattered in the air.

I felt the numbing feeling of the fight that just finished as I slowly supported my body.

Wu~wun. I swung about the lightsaber and nearly sheathed the sword on my back immediately, but I hurriedly turned it off.

After hanging the sword on the carabiner on the right side of my waist and the handgun in my left hand into the holster, I finally let out a long sigh. I looked up at the sunset sky, and found that the low-hanging clouds looked like a screen showing the words 'Congratulations'.

I won the first round with great difficulty. It was really good news that I could use such a lightsaber to defend against rifle bullets. However, I needed a lot of concentration to wield it, and my nerves were already starting to char and smoke.

I still have to go through another 4 tiring rounds—

A blue light came over my dejected body and started surrounding me. The silent sound of the wind gradually disappeared. Once the sounds became the buzzing of many humans, I found myself back at the waiting area.

It looked like I was transferred to the box seats near the wall like how I was before. I looked at both the left and right side, but didn't notice Sinon or Spiegel around. If Sinon is still battling, what I'm wondering is where the man who was related to Sinon in some way went to. I set my sights onto the entire space, and found that there was a familiar figure near the center of the dome, dressed in street clothes. He didn't notice that I came back as he merely focused on the large screen on the ceiling.

I lifted my head up just like he did, and found that the large screen that was only showing the countdown timer was now showing several battles. The screen showed players in deserts, forests or ruins that used handguns, machine guns or rifles to fight in different angles like those scenes in movies.

These should be some of the hundreds of battles that were going on and were chosen to be telecasted. Once the scene of a player being hit and blown to bits was shown, countless players who were gathered inside the dome would let out a deafening cheer.

I thought about whether Sinon's match would be telecasted as I took a few steps forward. I checked every single image from the top right corner, but

as the cameras continued to move, I really couldn't tell. I concentrated and tried to look for her aqua-blue hair.

—As I was too concentrated, I was too shocked that my heart nearly stopped when my right ear suddenly heard a voice. That deep, hoarse and somewhat metallic voice seemed to enter my mind.

"Are you, the real one?"

"...?"

I instinctively took a step back and looked back.

Immediately, I thought that I saw a ghost.

Of course, I wasn't referring to a real ghost, but a «Ghost-type» monster mob that appeared in the 65th level of Aincrad at night in the Ancient Fore.

The person in front of me wore a tattered dark grey mantle. The hood that was kept low was completely black, and only the eyes that were deep inside showed a little red light.

Under the light of the dark waiting dome, the stranger in front of me really looked like a ghost-type monster in SAO. Thus, I instinctively wanted to back away and draw my light saber to battle. I couldn't even control this instinct at all as my right hand jerked.

I panted as I looked at the feet of that guy. At the end of the tattered mantle, I could see the tip of the somewhat dirty boots.

He wasn't a ghost, but a player. After checking this obvious fact, I released my slightly held breath.

Looking closely, those red eyes weren't some ghost lights, but the shine on the lens of a pair of black goggles that covered the entire face. This somewhat rookie-like response from me and the way that guy just approached me at such a close place in such a rude manner, so I asked coldly,

"Real... what do you mean by that? Who are you?"

However, the player who was dressed in the dark-grey mantle didn't mention his name as he deliberately took a step closer to me even after I took a step back. This time, I didn't take a step back, but took his stare head on at about 20cm away from him.



That voice that seemed to have some form of sound effect within it and had some reverb overtones ringing in an interrupted manner,

"I saw it, the match. A sword, you used it."

"Ah...ahhh. That's not against the rules, right?"

The damned AmuSphere really showed the wavering in my heart as my answer sounded somewhat hoarse. The dark-grey mantle guy seemed to have read my heart as he advanced a few more centimeters.

Then, he said another thing with an even deeper voice. As the voice was rather soft, at this distance, I had to concentrate just to hear it.

"Let me ask, you again. Are you, the real, one?"

Before I could understand the meaning behind these words, my heart felt like it got hit by a thunderous-like premonition, and I could only remain rooted there.

—I know this guy!

That's right. I definitely met him somewhere. I did once talk to him straight on like I am doing now.

But where? After logging into GGO, I had only talked to the guy who was at where I appeared who wanted to buy my avatar, Sinon who brought me to buy the items and register, and her friend, three of them altogether. Thus, I couldn't say that I met him in this world before.

Was it in ALO? Did I meet this guy with a different avatar in ALFheim? I frantically searched the database of my mind to see if his verbal mannerisms and presence resembled someone. However, I really couldn't think of another. I don't remember someone like him who would stand in front of me and raise goosebumps in me with the cold air around him.

Where...where exactly did I meet this guy...

At this moment, the tattered mantle swayed, and a slender arm came out from inside. I got ready to back away, but after looking at it, I found that aside from a glove that was as tattered as his mantle, there was nothing else.

That hand in the air was pointed at me, and opened a window before moving it in a lackluster manner. Right now, the matchup schedule that was going on in this third BoB preliminaries appeared on the window.

That thin metal-like finger pressed on Group F, and in the end, the image of Group F expanded to show the entire screen. He pressed it once, and the center part of the matchup schedule became wider.

My eyes were attracted by his finger.

There were 2 names on it.

On the left side was «Uemaru», and on the right side was «Kirito». On the name on the right, there was a light-glowing line extending out from it. The news that I beat Uemaru and entered the second round was already reported.

His finger moved slightly, touched the word «Kirito» up and down, and then, it rang again— his voice.

"This, name. That, sword skill... Are, you real?"

Immediately, I was shocked for the third time, and this was the strongest impact.

My knees started to tremble, and I had to work hard not to let myself collapse.

This grey-colored mantle player— I know him!

The origin of the name «Kirito», and the sword skill I used to beat «Uemaru». This guy knows about them.

In other words...I didn't meet this guy in GGO or ALO.

But in SAO, «Sword Art Online». I once met this guy in the main stage of that death game, the floating city Aincrad.

This avatar hidden under the tattered mantle...no, the player who's wearing the AmuSphere and playing this avatar was a «SAO survivor» like me.

My heart was already pounding like crazy unknowingly. If it wasn't for the fact that we're inside the dark dome, he would have found out that my avatar's face was all white already.

Calm down. Calm down!! At this moment, my mind could only continue to repeat such words.

Even when meeting a SAO survivor, I have no need to be panicking so much. When Aincrad was about to collapse, I became famous because of the report of my unique skill «Dual Blades» and how I openly took on the leader of the Knights of the Blood, Heathcliff. Also, the «Vorpall Strike» I just used on Uemaru was a rather common skill under the one-handed sword category. Those high-levelled players in Aincrad can guess from the footage of the match and the player's name in the matchup schedule that I'm Kirito of the SAO clearing group. If it was me, if I find a player who I may know of at first, I might talk to him and chit-chat about the past or something.

So I had no need to be scared at all. I shouldn't be scared.

But why am I so...

The next moment— the thin and long arm removed the matchup schedule and kept his arm back into his mantle, and a part attracted my attention.

There was a thin gap at the front side of the glove that looked like a tattered bandage, probably a little higher from the inside of the wrist. From there, I could see his pale skin.

And on the skin, there was a squared tattoo about 5cm wide.

It was a Western Coffin that was drawn in a manga style. The lid showed a mysterious smiling face, and the lid was slightly open. A white arm reached out from the darkness inside, waving at anyone it saw. At that other world, another guy used poisoned water to numb me and got ready to kill me. At that time, he had a similar tattoo too.

That was the emblem of «Laughing Coffin».

Once I recognized that image, it was really a miracle that I could stifle my shout or prevent myself from collapsing onto the floor, or even that I wasn't forced to log out because of the abnormal brainwaves.

The player under the tattered mantle stared at me, who didn't react at all, and then whispered,

"You, don't know, what I'm asking?"

I slowly and cautiously nodded my avatar's head.

"...Ahh. I don't understand. What do you mean, by the real one."

"...."

The grey mantle silently took a step back. The red eyes looked like they were blinking as they flickered.

After what seemed like a few long seconds, the inorganic-like feeling seem to be amplified as the voice rang.

"...Then, forget about it. Well, whether, your name, is a lie, a fake...or whether you're, real."

He turned back and left the last words.

—"One day, I'll kill you."

These words made me feel that he wasn't talking about killing within the game.

The tattered mantle went away silently like a ghost— and then suddenly vanished.

Right now, the surroundings weren't like before where the player was still around.

My thin and petite body started to sway, and after barely supporting myself, I collapsed like an avalanche and sat down on the box seat beside me. I then cuddled my thin legs and put my knees to my forehead.

I closed my eyes, and inside my eyelids, I could see what was a clear little tattoo even though it was for about a fraction of a second.

A laughing coffin. There was only one guild that used such an emblem in Aincrad.

It was the killing guild «Laughing Coffin».

During the two years clearing SAO, it could be said that there were a lot of orange players who went into economic constraints and started stealing money and equipment from other players. Normally though, they would gather together in bunches to one person and force them to hand over valuable items. At the most, they would just use some numbing poison.

When someone attacks another person and causes the HP bar to be depleted, the player will really die in the real world, so no one would dare to do that. That's because these 10,000 players were all heavy Net-gamers, and were all people who had nothing to do with crime in real life.

However, this unwritten rule of «Not causing the HP to drop to zero» was broken by a strange player.

This guy's name was called «PoH». It was a really funny name for a character, but unexpectedly— or rather, it's because of this that he had a certain charisma.

The first attractive point about PoH was that he had an exotic-looking handsome appearance, and was a multilingual player who was well-versed in three languages. He may be a mixed-blood between a Japanese and a Western, and his Japanese, fluent English, and decent Spanish sounded just like a professional DJ singing rap, which would change the players around him. In the end, they went from being players to a real illegal organization that was cold and solid.

And the second point was really simple. PoH's own ability.

He was a talented dagger user. A dagger in his hand was just like an extension of his arm. The blade didn't even need an assist from the system and could crush monsters— or players. Especially at the end of the death game, once he got what's called a horrifyingly large dagger «Mate Chopper», his ability was so great that even players in the clearing group feared him.

The lawless followers who admired PoH were attracted to him in the opposite way people were attracted to Heathcliff of the Knights of Blood. Slowly, they expanded the boundaries in their heart.

A year after the game started, on the New Year's Eve in year 2023.

PoH and company, who have grown to about 30 people, attacked a small guild that was having an outdoor party in the field at a viewing spot, and killed them all.

The next day, there was the notification of «Laughing Coffin», a guild that wasn't accepted by the system and was designated as «red», and ended up in the main information providers of Aincrad.

However, the grey mantle player I just talked with shouldn't be PoH himself. That unrestrained and occasionally interrupted manner of speech was completely different from PoH's seemingly machine gun-like and extremely enthusiastic tone.

However, there was really a guy in «Laughing Coffin» who did talk like that. I met that guy before, and I think we did fight before. He wasn't just an ordinary member, but a rather high-ranking member. I could already remember so much, but why couldn't I remember his face and name?

No, I actually knew. The reason why I couldn't think of it was because I personally refused to remember.

«Laughing Coffin» was formed on the first day of 2024, and was eliminated on a certain summer night after August.

Of course, it wasn't automatically disbanded, but vanquished. It's because the clearing group, the players on the frontlines formed about 50 members in a crusade as we used force to destroy them.

Actually, we should have done that a long time ago, but we couldn't find the base of Laughing Coffin, so it was delayed till after August.

In Aincrad, players could buy houses or rooms, and whether it was on the streets or outside, we could accurately pinpoint the positions through the NPC real estate companies. The clearing group guessed that they would buy a larger house or a castle-like building that could allow 30 people to stay inside, so the information brokers accepted the clearing group's request and checked through all the large houses from the first level on.

But even though we found a few medium-to-small orange guild hideouts, we still couldn't find the most important Laughing Coffin's base after a few months.

Actually, it's no wonder we couldn't find them. Laughing Coffin used a floor that we had long conquered— a tower area that wasn't linked to the upper levels, which was a safe zone in a cave that would be easily forgotten once the designer installed it there. The clearing players will basically only take part in clearing the mazes in high towers, and medium-class players would slip into mazes where there're a lot of people. Of course, there would be players who would find that there were problems with the cave and enter in, but it's not hard to imagine that they were killed easily by Laughing Coffin to prevent their whereabouts from being revealed.

The reason the secret base of Laughing Coffin was revealed was because one of the members who may be unable to endure the guilt of killing exposed the secret to the clearing group. The clearing players then used this information to investigate and check that those guys were using that cave as a base before finally rallying a large-scale crusade. The leader of the squad was a member of the largest guild «Holy Dragon Alliance». Several strong players from the «Knights of the Blood» and other guilds joined in too. Of course, as a solo player, I was also invited to join the group.

Our numbers and average level were a lot higher than Laughing Coffin, so we thought that if we sealed the entrance to the safe zone to their base, there would be a high chance that they would surrender without fighting. However— just like how there was someone who revealed their secret...

Our thoroughly kept secret and battle strategy was known by them for some reason. When we entered the maze, none of the Laughing Coffin members were waiting in the large room of the safe zone. Of course, they didn't flee or hide in the alleys of the maze, but attacked us from behind.

They prepared all sorts of traps, poisons, trick items and all sorts of means to ambush us in random ways. The clearing group was severely confused at the beginning, but a response to sudden situations was an ability that was required of clearing groups, so we immediately readied ourselves again and started attacking backwards.

However— there was an unexpected difference between Laughing Coffin and the clearing group.

That was the guilt over killing someone. Once we realized that the berserk Laughing Coffin members wouldn't surrender no matter how much their HP was worn out, we started to waver.

Of course, we did discuss this possibility before, and at that time, we made the decision that we had to go all out even if we have to make the enemy's HP drop to zero. But including me, the members of the crusade couldn't deal the final blow when the enemy's HP was close to zero. One of the crusaders even threw his sword and knelt down on the ground.

First, there were a few martyrs in the crusaders. Then, the similarly berserk crusaders killed several members of Laughing Coffin too.

And what happened next was an ever bloody hell.

Once the battle ended, there were 11 casualties on the crusaders' side and 21 on Laughing Coffin's side. Amongst them, I personally used my sword to kill two of them.

But amongst the dead and the captured players, there was no sign of the name of the leader PoH.

The twelve remaining enemy players who survived that battle were all locked inside the Dark Iron Palace prison. If that grey mantle player was really a survivor, I may have talked to him at a certain time after clearing up from the battle. I remembered his verbal mannerism, but couldn't remember his face and name, all because I forced myself to forget about them all.

No...

No, maybe under that mantle...

Is one of the two people I personally killed.

Unexpectedly, I thought this. Thus, I continued to keep my knees cuddled as I sat on the seat and hurriedly shook my head. I started to grit my teeth with all I've got and tried to change my thinking.

The dead can't revive. In the SAO incident, whether it's the people I loved or loathed, the 4,000 victims wouldn't come back again. So that guy in the grey mantle must be one of the 12 Laughing Coffin members who survived. I should have known their names. I tried my best to endure the pain of searching through my memories as I tried to recall their information.

Then at that moment...

I again noticed a new possibility, and panted.

The metallic-like distorted voice that grey colored mantle guy let out was a rather deep whisper. What would it be like if he shouted with all he's got...

The roar from the voice file I heard a week ago rang deep inside my ears again.

"...This is real power, real strength! Foolish people, engrave the fear of these names in your hearts!"

"This gun's name and mine: «Death Pistol»... «Death Gun»!"

It was completely similar. I couldn't be mistaken. The voices would be the same.

That guy—

Was that grey mantle guy «Death Gun»?

If that's the case, my mission to dive into GGO, attract attention and become «Death Gun»'s target was quickly finished.

But... But, I never expected things to develop so quickly.

«Death Gun» was a survivor of SAO, and one of the original members of SAO— if that's the case.

Then he could use a gun inside the game to kill two players in the real world...

Maybe... Maybe... There really is such a power...

At this moment, I was suddenly tapped on the left shoulder, and nearly cried out. I was overly shocked as I trembled, and looked up, only to see the aqua-blue hair swaying in front of me.

"What's with your expression...?"

The girl— Sinon frowned as she said that. I could only force something like a smile at her.

"Ah...n-no, it's nothing..."

"Was your match just now a close call? But you came back rather early, didn't you?"

After hearing these words, I finally remembered that I was taking part in the preliminaries of the «Bullet of Bullets» tournament. I blinked, looked around, and found that the dome that's originally filled with players had about half of them left. It seemed that the first round of the preliminaries were already over, and the losers were transported to the surface. My next opponent should appear immediately, and the second round will then begin.

But in such a situation, I don't think I can still fight.

I continued to stare at Spiegel, who gave a somewhat shocked look from afar, and Sinon right in front of me before breathing out weakly from my mouth.

Immediately, Sinon gave a serious look and said,

"You're already so awkward after the first battle. You look like you definitely won't be able to make it to the finals. Buck up...I must pay you back for tricking me!"

After saying that, she raised her right fist and again slammed it on my shoulder.

I unconsciously used my hands to grab this little hand that was about to leave me. I then dragged it to my chest, and then kept her arm at my forehead.

"Wa-Wait a minute...what are you doing!?"

Sinon hurriedly whispered as she got ready to draw her hand back. However, I continued to grip onto the hand tightly and would not let go.

Even though it's heat that's coming from a polygonal avatar, it was able to give me this inexplicable warmth. Once I felt that terrifying freezing feeling that occupied my heart, my body started to tremble.

"...What are you doing...?"

I heard a bothered voice first, and then, I felt that small and warm hand at my chest start to relax.

Chapter 7

There was a feeling of a little tingling in her right index finger, causing Sinon to frown. Rubbing her finger with her thumb with the intent to soothe the irritation did not do anything to remove the feeling.

She knew why though.

It was Kirito's fault. That rude, arrogant and very dense beginner. She used all of the strength in her body to clench her right hand.

This was normally impossible, and she half understood it in her head. Sinon was now in FullDive in the virtual world with the AmuSphere; no matter how hard she clasped her hand, her real body blood flow congestion or nerve pressure in reality would not be affected. All the sensations that occur in this world were from the result of electrical impulses directly sent to the brain by the machine with virtual signals.

----But.

Right now, Sinon's right hand could still feel the warmth and pressure of when the light saber user had held her hand strongly, although it had been close to two hours ago.

Giving up trying to erase the feeling, Sinon returned her right hand to the anti-material sniper rifle. On the lightly set spring of the trigger, she gently placed her index finger there. The grip of her beloved gun «Hecate II» that had gone through so many battles with her was like an extension of her body, but that little tingling in her finger persisted.

Sinon was now hiding in a clump of small bushes on the edge of a high cliff waiting for a chance to snipe.

The stage was the «Wilderness at the Crossroads». The topography was characterized by a staggeringly dry central plateau where two straight roads crossed. The opponent's name was «Stinger». BoB selection F Block, Fifth battle; it was the first semi-finals, and it had been twelve minutes since the start.

If she wins this match, regardless of the results for her next match, she will obtain the rights to enter the BoB main tournament battle royale scheduled for tomorrow, Sunday night. But, being able to win up to this point, the enemy Stinger must also be fairly strong.

Although he had a name like that, he was not actually equipped with a portable surface-to-air missile launcher «Stinger». His main weapon should be the «FN • SCAR» carbine rifle, which alone was enough of a threat. He was also equipped with an ACOG scope for improved accuracy. So, should they get close enough to get a visual of each other, Sinon might not be able to win.

Fortunately, in this map, there were four blocks separated by roads; you had to go through the central crossroads to reach the others. When two players first appear on this map, they are placed a minimum of 500 meters apart; thus, it was impossible for them to be placed in the same block.

In other words, if Stinger wanted to get within range of Sinon to snipe with SCAR, even knowing that he would need to pass through the central crossroads, he must charge through; on the other hand, Sinon must succeed in attacking him while he was in the crossroads.

With only this option, Stinger would try to extend the time before he would charge, as a tactic to exhaust Sinon's concentration. Although this was the case, Sinon could not deny the possibility of him making a move early, so she had no choice but to stretch the limits of her nerves in concentration and continue to stare through her sights like this.

Now, labelled from A to O with the pre-selected knockouts divided in 15 blocks, more than half of the deciding matches had finished, so only about 10 other matches are currently ongoing at the same time. In the Standby Room, on the first floor lobby, or at a pub on the street, you could watch all the games live. Focused on Sinon and Stinger was an audience who should be feeling very bored right now. After all, from the start of the match until now, both sides had not fired a single bullet.

On the other side, simultaneously within the F District semi-finals, there was a battle that was without a doubt completely not boring; that battle was unfolding in a flashy way.

The reason was— over there, one of them was a close combat specialist with two machine guns, and the other was one who used an even shorter range weapon— the lightsaber user's battle.

Now she must not lose concentration. Although she understood that, her thoughts returned to that mysterious black-haired girl, no, boy.

The first battle took her about ten minutes, and when she returned to the Standby Room, the first person to meet her was Spiegel — Shinkawa Kyouji and his congregations. After exchanging simple greetings and a thank you, Sinon returned to her original box seat. The appearance of Kirito there gave her a slight shock. This can't be. She did not think that he would win and return earlier than herself. Hmm, you are a little capable. She walked towards him thinking of saying that— but then again, Sinon was surprised by another thing.

Before the match, Kirito was full of that easy going attitude, but now he sat hunched over on a bench holding his knees, his head lowered and slender shoulders trembling.

... ... He won though. Is a battle with a gun opponent that scary?

Thinking about that, Sinon unconsciously stretched out her right hand to knock on the shoulder wrapped up in the night camo pattern jacket.

Suddenly, Kirito's whole body shrunk in surprise, with an action that could only be described as cautiously, and he looked up.

Sinon knew that anyone who doesn't know him would think he was a female, with both a cute and clever face on the avatar — the look was like a glimpse from the depths of hell, filled with deep fear.

".....Why do you have such a face?"

Sinon unconsciously whispered, and hearing her words, Kirito blinked a few times and pulled his face into a stiff smile.

"Nothing's wrong," Kirito answered in a very weak voice, and Sinon asked if his first fight was that difficult. But, the young face hidden behind the long black hair leaked out weak breathing, and he did not answer anything else.

He was not an opponent that she should get involved with beyond that.

Kirito should have known that Sinon would have misunderstood his gender. But he deliberately did not clear the misunderstanding and let Sinon show him around the streets, help him go shopping, and finally bring him to the same changing room.

Of course, she had mistaken him for a girl, and it was her fault for not asking for his name card. Therefore, over half of Sinon's anger was directed at herself.

In the real world, ever since she was well used by her classmates, she should have made the decision in her heart to no longer depend on others and to make no friends. When confronted by a rare GGO female player who asked for directions, she had completely forgotten about her decision.

It was fun. When she brought him to the market to shop and rode behind the three wheeled buggy, Sinon realized that she gave an honest smile, something she had not done for a long time in GGO. That's right — Sinon was not really angry about Kirito being a male. When she was together with him, she was being extra defenseless, something she couldn't forgive herself for.

That's why, when she learnt that Kirito won through the first battle, she was truly happy.

To meet in the final battle with him, then smash his cute looks with the bullets of Hecate and become stronger than before encountering this guy. Although she had this in mind, that Kirito had been taken over with fear like he was a different person.

Sinon spoke almost subconsciously in a voice laced with anger.

"You've become like this with just one battle? Going to the finals is a dream within a dream. Get a hold of yourself... I... have to take back what you owe me."

She held her right hand in a fist and once again knocked on Kirito's shoulder.

That hand was suddenly covered by two white hands. He then pulled that hand strongly and tightly held it to his fatigued chest.

"Hey, Hey... What are you doing!?"

Sinon shouted on reaction and tried to pull her hand out, but she had never imagined Kirito's delicate body to have such high STR rating, as he continued to hold her hand.

His hands were as cold as ice, and Sinon felt that touching his hands even made her breath cold.

At this time, in Sinon's field of vision, there appeared a 'report sexual harassment' button. If she were to press it with her left hand or say "report," then Kirito's avatar would be delivered to the Gurokken prison area and, for a short period of time, would not be able to get out.

However, Sinon made no movement, and she also did not say anything.

Looking at his clenched hands and that slender body slightly shivering away, Sinon was struck by a strong sense of déjà vu. She had seen a girl from somewhere, in that exact same posture before. Thinking further about it, she immediately noticed that was herself.

Not Sinon the sniper, but Asada Shino from the real world. It was just like the times when Shino lay curled up in bed from the memory filled with the stench of blood and gunpowder, crying for someone to save her.

Aware of that at this point in time, Sinon involuntarily relaxed her right hand.

".....Why are you.....?"

She gently asked, but there was no answer. Even so, Sinon felt it.

Clinging onto her hands, that black haired avatar — no, inside that, the player whose face and name she doesn't know might be trapped in a similar darkness as Shino.

What happened, Sinon wanted to ask.

But before that, there was a faint light that enveloped Kirito's body, and then he disappeared. His next opponent had been set, so he was transferred to the site for his second battle.

With him like that, he probably would not be able to fight properly. Sinon determined that and gave a small sigh.

The one who lost will return to the Hall instead of the underground waiting area here. That's why, if Kirito lost, then today— or put it another way, she probably will not have a chance to meet him again.

Of course, that was not really a big deal. They were not even friends, but just happened to go in the same direction to the Government House. After today, she would forget his face and name.

While she told herself that, Sinon took her hand that remained in the air and put it on her chest.

—That was how it was supposed to be.

But beyond Sinon's wildest expectations, the second, third and even the fourth combat battle had been won by Kirito using just a lightsaber and a pistol.

While Sinon was waiting for her next match, she only had the chance to see his fight on the monitor once. His fighting style was like a 'Last Stand' or 'Banzai' attack with extremely suicidal tactics. Faced with the rapid-fire assault rifle of his AGI-based opponent, he used the small pistol FN Five-Seven, bought at Sinon's suggestion, as support fire in his frontal charge. He ignored the enemy bullets that hit his avatar's outer parts and only used his lightsaber to block the deadly ones, and with that, he closed the distance in the blink of an eye, then cut the enemy apart together with his rifle.

There was not a single person in the first and second BoB who fought this way. In the standby room, people were amazed and surprised, and Sinon could only watch with wide eyes.

With this momentum, Kirito could easily reach the finals of the F Block. However, against that kind of unreasonable opponent, how is she supposed to fight him?

After seeing Kirito's match, Sinon thought like that even as her semi-final match began, and part of her mind would not cease to consider the matter. At the same time, she could not stop thinking about the player called Kirito, himself.

When shopping together, he revealed a curious natural smile. When he was exposed as a male, Kirito waited for her to skin him alive for his cheeky attitude. Then, after his first battle, holding Sinon's hand, his weak body trembled. And – with his blue light blade, he cut up enemies relentlessly, with a ghost like appearance.

In the end, which is the real «Kirito»?

And why does she continue to think about these kind of things?

Realizing that she was irritated for no reason, Sinon lightly bit her lower lip while her right eye was against the high magnification scope. At this point—

A kilometer away, watching the road's intersection, she captured a large shadow speeding out from the mountain side.

Sinon automatically fine-tuned the Hecate. Wind was blowing from the left at 2.5m per second. Humidity was 5%. She placed the center of the faint reticule slightly above the shadow and waited for the Bullet Circle to shrink before pulling the trigger without hesitation.

THUD—

From the sights, the 50 caliber bullet flew through the air in a heat haze like tunnel. It drew a slight spiral track towards the bottom left and hit the upper part of the shadow.

"... ... There."

Sinon breathed out as she pulled the bolt of the Hecate back, emptying the cartridge shell and putting the next round of ammunition in the chamber.

The shadow that crumbled with a light sound was not the opponent Stinger. Instead, it was a lump of rock with a diameter of about one meter.

The next moment, flying out from the same place as the rock, an even larger silhouette came rushing out leaving a trail of dust behind.

A four-wheel armored vehicle—the «Humvee». Things such as vehicles are not items held by a player but are bonuses on specific points of the map. People who get there first can use them. It looked brand new, except for a small dent in front— Sinon instantly understood: the stone was deliberately knocked out by that car.

Stinger, who was supposed to be in the driver's seat, knew that Sinon's Hecate II was a bolt-action rifle and also knew that she would be aiming at the intersection that he must pass through.

So, he knocked that stone into the intersection with the Humvee to be shot, then while she prepared for the next shot, he planned to cross the intersection.

The idea was correct. In fact, the vehicle already reached the center of the intersection while she was pulling the bolt handle. She only has one more shot. Furthermore, she did not have time to aim carefully.

However, Sinon did not panic.

Stinger took away Sinon's largest advantage as a sniper, the «No Bullet Line First Shot». But in exchange, he also gave her important information. In Sinon's view, the trajectory path from her first shot was burnt in it. As

long as she does not panic, she can make the second bullet fly the exact same path. If she used that, it would be possible for her to have a far higher accuracy hit than the first shot.

After making a slight adjustment to the gun body, Sinon pulled the trigger a second time. BOOM!

The 50 caliber bullet hit the side window of the driver`s seat and went right through the thick bullet proof glass easily.

The next moment, the vehicle made a big arc, went off the side of the road, and then crashed into the side of the mountain. From the front engine, flames erupted.

"... .. If you got off the car and ran, you might have seen the Bullet Line and be able to avoid it."

Sinon whispered as she chambered the third round. Keeping the scope on her right eye, she captured the burning Humvee in the reticule. No matter how many seconds she waited, Stinger did not appear. It looks like he died in the driver`s seat, but she maintained a firing position.

Once the evening air displayed "CONGRATULATIONS" in colored words, Sinon stood up from the bushes.

Game time, 19 minutes and 15 seconds. Semi-final cleared.

In this way, just as she had planned, she got a ticket to the BoB tournament. However, she showed no sign of victory, not even a smile. Her thoughts had been directed towards the upcoming preliminary F Block finals.

The mystery that was Kirito, no doubt, spent less time in his semi-final match. His opponent was armed with two SMGs. No matter how many bullets he shot, if he lets that lightsaber user get close, he will be showered by the instant death energy blade before Kirito's hp is all gone. Kirito, after all, with his amazing reaction speed, had the ability to «predict the trajectory prediction line». The best chance to stop him would be suppression fire from an M134 mini-gun, or other weapons like it.

Therefore, Sinon maintained a hold on Hecate, waiting motionlessly for the transfer to the next battleground.

After a few seconds, she did not return to the standby room, but flew directly to the final preparation area. The hexagonal surface of the window

on the screen was marked by the opponent's name, and sure enough, the name there was [Kirito].

After the next transfer, she opened her eyes to see an elevated road extending out in a straight line, and the blood red sunset it went into.

The «Inter-Continental Highway» stage. Although the battlefield is the same size as the last one, about one kilometer squared, since you cannot get off the highway that goes from east to west, in fact, the battlefield is quite slender and simple.

However, there were numerous cars, trucks and even a helicopter wreckage, and there were cracks as the road went up and down, so from one side of the road, you could not see the other side.

Sinon took a quick look behind to confirm that she was in the eastern-most corner of the map. Then the opponent, Kirito, would be in the west extension of the road, at least 500 meters away.

She looked around, then soon ran up the road. Her destination was the large tour bus sitting across the road to the right front. From the semi-open back door into the bus's interior, and then up the stairs to the second level. She threw herself stomach down on the center of the floor, took Hecate II from her shoulder and opened its two legs. She aimed the gun muzzle at the panoramic window on the bus's front side, took up a sniping position, and flipped up the scope's front and back covers.

The sun is right in front of her. That means, no matter where she hid outside, the scope's lens reflection from the sunlight will have the danger of letting the enemy notice her. A sniper whose position is found out is easy to take care of.

But inside this bus, mirror coating on the glass outside will hide the scope's reflection. Also, with the height, she could see past most of the obstructions on the road.

Kirito should probably be closing in at high speed by moving from one obstacle to another. She did not think that she can hit that enemy with the Bullet Line. Her chance, is while he does not know her location, that first shot.

'- Hit him. I must.'

Carving that belief strongly into her heart, Sinon placed her right eye at the scope.

Why she wanted to win so much, she was not very clear, herself.

Indeed, Sinon was deceived by Kirito when he hid his gender as she showed him around and helped him buy equipment. Beyond that, he also saw her changing in the preparation room.

However, even saying so, it is nothing but this level of things. She had not lost any items, and only her avatar's underwear was seen. From the meeting on the street of Gurokken, to their separation at the standby room were only tens of minutes, it should not be difficult to forget.

But now, all the different battles she experienced in GGO were faded compared to how strongly she wanted to win against Kirito. Yes— even more than that fearsome minigun user, Behemoth. For someone who just arrived at GGO today, and furthermore against a lightsaber user that all gunners consider to be heretical, why would she go to such extents...

...No.

No, maybe, she had already understood the reason.

That is because, 'I no longer consider that guy as an «enemy» in my heart.' When that guy sat on the hard bench trembling as his cold hand held hers, she realized that a feeling that she could not name was born in her heart.

Compassion? No.

Pity? No.

Sympathy...? No, absolutely not.

'There is no one that can sympathize with me. There should not be a single person that bears the same painful darkness as me. I had been looking for such a person, but in the end, she was just constantly, constantly, constantly betrayed.'

The only thing that can save her, is her strength. Because she understood that, it's why she is here now.

She does not want to know Kirito's situation and does not need to know. As long as she mercilessly blows apart that avatar that confused her, he would be buried in her numerous kills thus far. Then she would forget.

That is all she needed to do.

Carefully but deliberately, Sinon set her mind and stared through the scope; her finger gripped the trigger.

So—

In the background of the crimson sunset, when a shadow appeared, in a flash, Sinon forgot her self control as a sniper and leaked out a sound.

"What..?"

The wind blew the long black hair, camouflage clothes wrapped the delicate body, and a light saber hung from the belt. No doubt, it was Kirito.

However, he was not running. And he did not seem to want to hide. He was right in the middle of the highway on the slightly raised center dividing line, walking with a sway. It was exactly the opposite of his previous match, a totally defenseless posture.

—Is he trying to say that, even without the Bullet Line, he could easily dodge my shot?

Thinking this, anger exploded inside her head as the crosshairs went to Kirito's head. Then, Sinon went to pull the trigger— just before that, she realized that her guess one second ago was wrong.

Kirito did not look in front. He just lowered his head down, with his body limp as if weakened, just mechanically dragging his feet forward. This was completely opposite to the "chased by ghosts" charge in his previous match, and it was a lethargic pace.

With him like that, dodging Sinon's shot was absolutely impossible. The Hecate II's bullet is shot out faster than the speed of sound, and it is too late by the time you hear the shot. And then with him looking down, of course he would not be able to see the muzzle flare.

That means— that is, Kirito did not want to avoid her shot from the start. He intended to deliberately get shot, and then lose to end the match. Once he obtained the right to enter the main tournament, whatever came after... his match with Sinon no longer mattered. That is what it means.

"...Don't, jok..."

Sinon's lips leaked out that raspy sound.

She put her finger on the trigger and applied force. The green Bullet Circle appeared, then centered on Kirito's lowered head and rapidly shrunk. The Circle's intense movement showed Sinon's chaotic heartbeat. But with only a weak breeze and a distance of only 400 meters, her shot would definitely hit.

Her index finger pushed down, and the trigger spring squeaked. And there she relaxed her finger. She pushed down again, trigger squeaked. Again relaxed.

"...Don't joke with me!!"

Her shout, was distorted like a child's crying sound.

At the same time, Sinon pulled the trigger. The 50 caliber rifle's roar filled the interior of the tour bus, and over half of the front glass filled with a white cloud then broke apart.

The bullet that came out flew through the crimson sunset in a straight line— it passed by Kirito's right cheek with over 50cm of space between them and hit the car far behind him. A fire pillar, and after that black smoke erupted.

From the pressure of the 12.7mm bullet flying by close to his head, Kirito lightly swayed. He stopped and looked up.

While Kirito looked like a girl on the surface, only a 'why did you miss?' questioning look appeared on Kirito's face. While staring at that face through the scope, Sinon pulled the bolt handle and fired again in one action.

This time, the bullet went over the top of Kirito's head and away behind him.

Reload. Pull the trigger. The third bullet hit the asphalt floor next to his black clothed right foot, leaving a big crater. Reload. Fire. Reload. Fire. Reload. Fire.

Six empty shells bounced around Sinon and disappeared after a little while.

Kirito was standing there, still unscathed, and through the scope, his eyes continued to look questioningly.

Sinon slowly stood up, her hands holding Hecate, and began to walk through the bus. She jumped out of what little remains of the front glass window onto the road and continued walking.

Tens of seconds later, when she closed to about 5 meters away from Kirito, she stopped.

Staring at the still standing black lightsaber user in the face, she breathed out.

"...Why?"

The meaning of this question, and the criticism mixed in it, seemed to reach Kirito. His black pupils shook, and again looked down at his feet.

Finally, he said without feeling, like an NPC.

"... My goal, is just to enter tomorrow's main tournament. I don't have a reason to fight beyond that."

Sinon had expected this answer. However, the feeling of 'that's why I cannot forgive' welled up in her chest, and once again, Sinon pushed out words.

"Then, you should have shot yourself with that gun right at the start of the match. Are you worried about ammo cost waste? Or do you want to give me a kill count, thinking that this way I would be satisfied...!?"

To the head lowered Kirito, she took another step closer—

"Merely a VR game or merely one match, it's your choice if you feel that way! But don't force those values on me!!"

Sinon cried out in a trembling voice, and she also realized that she said something irrational.

To impose personal values upon your opponent, then it's the same as what she had done. If she cannot forgive Kirito, then Sinon should have used the first round of ammunition to determine the match, and then forget about him afterwards. Instead she used 6 rounds of ammunition to threaten him, and beyond that she threw out her feelings at him face to face. On the other hand, the unreasonable one might be herself.

—However.

Even so, Sinon could not stop herself. The Hecate held in trembling hands, face distorted, and could not stop a drop of tear that leaked out of the edge of her eye.

With his back to the distant sun as it set, half of his body in shadow, Kirito's eyes were tightly closed, and his mouth was stiff.

Finally, the delicate avatar relaxed, with a weak, but with a hint of emotion, he said.

"...I too... A long time ago, I felt that I blamed someone like that..."

"..."

Kirito glanced at the silent Sinon, then he bowed his head down.

"...I'm so sorry. I was wrong. Although it is only a game, only a match, but I should still give it all I've got... otherwise, there is no meaning or qualification for me to live in this world. I, should have known that..."

There, he raised his head, the black eyes looked straight at Sinon, and the swordsman from a strange land said.

"Sinon, can you give me a chance to make it up to you? Right now, have a match with me."

From the unexpected words, Sinon momentarily forgot her anger and wrinkled her eyebrows.

"Right now, even if you say that..."

BoB's qualification and main tournament are encounter fights with unknown enemy starting locations. Since they met face to face like this without fighting, there should be no way to return to the beginning condition.

However, Kirito showed a slight smile, then pulled out the FN Five-Seven from the holster on his left waist. He used a hand gesture to stop Sinon, who was about to take position, and pulled the gun's slide once. He skillfully caught the ejected bullet in the air, then placed the pistol back into the holster.

While spinning the 5.7mm bullet with his left hand fingers, Kirito said.

"Your gun, it still has ammo, right?"

"...Yeah, only one shot left."

"Then, let's go with a duel style. Let's see... 10 meters away. You use your rifle, and I use my sword. I'll throw the bullet. When it hits the ground, we start the match. How about that?"

Surprised, or more like Sinon was stunned. Without noticing that her earlier anger had thinned, she moved her mouth.

"Look here... do you think that would even be a match? With just 10 meters apart, this Hecate's bullet will definitely hit. With my skill proficiency and stats supplement, combined with its stats, it's a sure hit distance in the system. You won't even have a chance to move your lightsaber. The result is no different from your suicide."

"We won't know till we try it."

After saying that with arrogance— Kirito's red lips showed a sharp smile.

At the moment she saw this expression, Sinon felt a jolt run through her back.

He was serious. This lightsaber user, really wanted to win against Sinon in a Western-style duel.

Indeed, the Hecate II had only one round of ammunition left in the magazine. So, he must dodge that somehow to win. He might be thinking like that, too naive. Against a sure hit and sure kill bullet, there should be no «somehow». Compared to the shopping mall «game to avoid the bullets» gunman's antique revolver, whether it is bullet speed, accuracy, or power, it is not on the same level.

But— if Kirito really did have «something», then.

I want to see it. No matter what.

The next moment, Sinon nodded and said:

"...Fine. I agree to use this approach for a showdown."

Then she turned away, took around ten steps east on the center dividing line, and then turned back to face the sun.

The distance between the two people, was just ten meters. She raised the Hecate that she was carrying, nestled the butt of a rifle against her right shoulder, and spread apart her feet in a standard shooting position.

In the real world, even the strongest person could not fire an anti-materiel rifle from a standing shooting position. But in GGO, as long as the physical abilities reach a sufficient value, it was no longer impossible. Of course, one cannot withstand the huge recoil and will fall back behind, but since she only has one bullet, this doesn't matter.

She pulled the bolt handle to place the last bullet into the chamber.

When she looked through the scope, even at the lowest magnification, Kirito's shape filled her view.

It was like the beauty of young girls, the weak and powerlessness a few minutes ago no longer existed. His obsidian like looks shone brightly, and a fearless smile on his lips.

Kirito closed the fingers on his hand that was holding the FN Five-Seven bullet and stretched that arm straight in front, as he pulled out the lightsaber on his right waist. He pressed the switch with his thumb, and it issued out a blue-white brilliant blade of energy.

Right now, the audience outside watching the F-Block final might be titling their head and wondering what those two people are doing. She did not care about that. A bullet versus a blade. With common sense, it's not a fighting match, but Sinon could really feel her tension going up.

—Sure enough, that guy has «something».

With such a direct feeling, Sinon slightly adjusted Hecate's aim.

On the other side of the reticule, Kirito spoke.

"...Then, let's start."



Then, he did not hesitate to flick the bullet into the air. The spinning bullet flew high. Light reflected by the setting sun made it shine like a ruby as it traveled into the air.

Kirito lowered his waist, placed his left foot in front and leaned half of his body forward, and the lightsaber on his right hand slanted down to the side. Even with his fingers that held the blade, there was not any feel of force; it was a relaxed posture. But even in such a stance, the delicate avatar sent out a pressure as if she was targeted at her heart by a rifle muzzle.

Sinon, as well, realized that her sensations sharply rose higher. The 5.7mm bullet moving in the air seemed very slow. Every other sound faded. She was only conscious of the existence of her body and the Hecate II. No, the distinction between those two also disappeared. The shooter and the gun had completely merged to become one, with only striking the target accurately with the bullet in mind.

From her view, the white reticule, and the green circle also disappeared.

In front of the silent swordsman in black, falling at a slow pace, was the bullet signal. Although the bullet crossed her scope and went out of sight, Sinon could feel its existence. It rolled and tumbled to the ground— The sharp bullet hit the asphalt— The game system determined the contact of the two objects, and issued an order to convey a sound effect through the AmuSphere— the signal released an electronic pulse, in Sinon's hearing—

PING.

At the instant of that small sound's echo, her right index finger pulled the trigger.

In the next few seconds, the phenomenon that occurred would be engraved into Sinon's accelerated consciousness with fresh color.

From the Hecate's large muzzle break came orange flames.

On the other side, the blue white lightning cut through the dusk darkness.

Shining like shooting stars, two small lights split to the left and right, flying far away.

Pushed by the anti-materiel rifle's huge recoil, while falling backwards, Sinon belatedly realized the meaning of the scene that she saw.

It was cut apart.

At the moment the bullet fell to the ground, Kirito's lightsaber slashed upwards, and cut the 50-caliber bullet that was supposed to be a fatal hit. The two shooting stars that Sinon saw, were fragments of the bullet that were cut by the high concentration energy blade, and flew past either side of Kirito behind him.

But— it should not be possible!

If he had guessed her bullet's path and swung the sword, then the result would be understandable. However, Sinon had not aimed at the avatar's center as she was supposed to, but instead, she aimed at Kirito's left leg.

Hecate is such a large-caliber gun that it has something called «impact damage» as additional damage. In this case of super-close range, even if only the wrist or foot were hit, the impact area attack will take the HP right to 0.

For Kirito who converted to GGO today, and with no knowledge about guns, he should not know about this. So, if he had guessed the bullet's path, he should certainly have only guarded the center of his body.

Even so, Kirito was able to accurately target the bullet that aimed for his left thigh with a flash of his lightsaber. That was not a gamble. Moreover, at this distance, this projectile velocity, Bullet Line assist would be useless. In the end why— How did he...?

Even overwhelmed by surprise for the moment, Sinon's hand did not stop. While she was pushed backwards, her left hand let go of the Hecate, then she reached instinctively for the MP7 at her waist.

However, he was faster than that.

Like lightning, Kirito dashed across the ten-meter gap between them and appeared in front of Sinon. The blade in his right hand hummed and dyed her view a brilliant blue.

She will be cut.

Even with that prediction, Sinon did not close her eyelids. Her open eyes saw, with a huge sunset for background, glossy black hair sway in arcs like a fan.

Then, everything stopped.

The Hecate in her right hand, and the MP7 in her left hand dangled as Sinon was deeply bended backward. However, no matter how long, she did not fall to the road. Kirito's left hand supporting her back was the reason.

And then in the swordsman's right hand was the lightsaber, held against Sinon's exposed and defenseless neck. Only the sound of the blade's plasma vibration hum, and the sound of the wind blowing afar could be heard.

With his left foot forward, Kirito was bent towards Sinon who was leaning back, just if they were enacting a scene in a dance as they were close together, and it remained paused for a while.

The dark pupils were right in front of her eyes. Until now, both in the real world and even in this virtual world, she had not allowed anyone to come this close to her. However, Sinon was not aware of this and asked in a whisper while peeking into Kirito's eyes.

"...How did you predict my aim?"

At the other end of the energy blade, he softly spoke;

"Even through the scope's lens, I saw your eye."

Eye. In other words— her line of sight.

He read the bullet's path by her line of sight, was what Kirito meant.

There was actually someone in this world who could do this. Sinon had never thought about this. A small tremble that was either terror or not travelled its way from her back to the top of her head.

So strong. Kirito's strength, had gone beyond the level of a VR game.

However, since this is the case— Why then, in the corner of the Standby Room, did he tremble so much? Why did those cold hands firmly hold on to Sinon's hand?

Sinon opened her mouth and a small voice asked.

"You are this strong. What are you afraid of?"

Then she saw the eyes of Kirito momentarily shake. After a brief silence, Kirito answered as if he was enduring something.

"This is not strength. Just skill."

At the moment she heard those words, Sinon forgot about the blade of light next to her throat and shook her head violently.

"Lies. You liar. If it was just technique, it would not be possible to cut Hecate's bullet. You should know. How did you become this strong? I... I want to know that, so..."

"Then let me ask you!"

Kirito suddenly interrupted her in a low voice, but with a blue flame like heat mixed in his voice.

"If that gun's bullet will really kill the real world player... And then, if you do not kill, either you, or someone important to you, will be killed. If that is the case, would YOU. PULL. THE. TRIGGER!?"

"...!"

Sinon forgot to breathe, and her eyes widened.

Does he know? she thought that for a moment. The mysterious visitor, did he know that Sinon's past was painted in darkness, and an incident happened?

'- No, wrong. It's not like that. Probably... this person as well, in the past...'

The left hand supporting Sinon's back became hard with tension, but soon relaxed. While his hair touched Sinon's forehead, Kirito shook his head and whispered;

"...I can no longer do that. That's why I am not strong. I... cut two people at that time, no, three people, and I do not even know their real names... I just closed my eyes, plugged my ears, and pretended to forget everything..."

Sinon did not understand what he meant.

However, she was sure of one thing. Inside Kirito, a darkness similar to Sinon's— a fear was hidden. And then probably, while he waited in the Standby Room, something happened. Something that made his supposedly buried darkness overflow.

Sinon's left hand let the MP7 fall onto the ground.

Her empty hand rose as if pulled by an invisible string, and closed near Kirito's cheek past the lightsaber blade.

Right before her fingers touched—

Unexpectedly, the usual carefree smile returned to Kirito's cheeks. His eyes still retained a painful light. Even so he shook his head, and said as if to interrupt Sinon's hand.

"—Well. It appears that I've won the match... Do you agree?"

"What...? Ah, that's..."

While she blinked as she was unable to switch her feelings, Kirito's face closed in and he whispered.

"Won't you resign? I don't like cutting a girl."

Hearing his very rude and cheeky words, Sinon finally realized her situation. In other words, she was restrained by a left hand on her back and a lightsaber at her throat, and while she was in an unmovable state in extremely close contact with Kirito, that miserable appearance— that scene, had been broadcast live to the Standby Room, Presidential Lobby, and all the pubs in Gurokken, such was the situation.

While conscious of the blood rushing to her face, Sinon spit out a retort from her clenched teeth.

"...I am thankful to have another chance to fight with you. In tomorrow's main tournament, absolutely stay alive till you encounter me."

And then she turned her face away, and loudly shouted, "I Resign!"

Match time: 18 minutes and 52 seconds.

F Group, Third Bullet of Bullets qualifying final ended.

(To Be Continued)

Author's Notes

I'm Kawahara Reki. I'm extremely grateful that you bought the fifth volume of this series. Including the other series, this would be my 10th work, «Sword Art Online 5, Phantom Bullet».

In Net-gaming, there are two rather popular forms of gaming genre other than MMORPGs. One of them is «Real-Time Strategy», and the other one is «First Person Shooter».

I like both genres, but if I want to talk about RTS, this column wouldn't be enough, so I'll have to cut it short (laughs).

And as the title implies, FPS is a game genre that normally allows the main character (=player) to wield a gun through a first-person view and play. It originated from America, so right now, no matter whether it's the number of games or the number of players, Americans form the majority. But when fighting online in a player vs. battle, there would be situations where people would feel like saying "Are you the revived version of Simo Hayha^[20]?" Most likely, it's those kind of situations while I'm still rushing forward at full speed, I'll hear a bang from afar, and then there's bleeding from between my eyebrows and I died, or that in close ranged combat, I already got an assault rifle and am shooting recklessly, but the enemy is closing in on me, dodging left and right, and then using the knife to kill me easily (At this moment, I really feel like saying: "Are you the revived version of Simo Hayha!?!"). However, people would just say that I'm a Greenhorn.

The PvP in MMOs would be affected greatly because of the level and equipment difference, but the FPS character's ability itself would rely on the player's own skill. One of the reasons why I created this «Phantom Bullet» is to present this «ability» in the «SAO» series.

However, the problem was that even though I like FPS, I don't understand anything about guns at all...this time, I used a lot of gun names and unique terms, but these were all hastily compiled knowledge at the last second. To the readers who are rather well-versed in this, you may feel that there are a lot of scenes where you'll go "How is this possible!", but I hope that everyone can be forgiving and treat it as "It's part of a game anyway."

To Miki-san, who is beginning to have more and more related tasks and yet still patiently waited for me to fine-tune my original script, abec-san, who was able to present the charm of two (laughs) female leads perfectly

in the illustrations, and everyone who supported me even after I wrote that 'I'll be going crazy', please accept my headshot gratitude with your foreheads. I hope to meet you next time!

June 10th 2010, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ Cream Puffs
2. ↑ The more formal version of -san
3. ↑ University of Tokyo (Tokyo Daigaku) considered to be the most prestigious university in Japan
4. ↑ Japanese Standard Time
5. ↑ this is a series of puns in Japanese... Basically, 'Usujio' is a type of soy sauce (with 20-30% less salt content, making it ideal for preparing most light and delicate dishes), and 'Tarako' means 'Cod Roe' (as in the fish's eggs). With the other name, 'Hokkai' means 'Northern Sea' (pretty much everyone should understand that 'Hokkai' refers to 'Hokkaido', famous for its seafood), and 'Ikura' means 'Salmon Roe'. Obviously the main joke here is that both characters are named after fish eggs, hence Kazuto/Kirito's comment on them probably being related... urh... because they're named after different species of fish, and so...
6. ↑
7. ↑ a traditional wintertime inuit food from Greenland that is made of auks preserved in the hollowed-out body of a seal. Around 500 auks are put into the seal skin intact, including beaks, feet and feathers, before as much air as possible is removed from the seal skin, which is then sewn up and sealed with grease, with a large rock placed on top to keep the air content low. Over the course of several months, the birds ferment, and are then eaten during the Greenlandic winter, particularly on birthdays and weddings.
8. ↑ Scandivnavian rotten fish
9. ↑
10. ↑ Search for "Eitai Dori" in Google Maps. That will help you guys a bit to see where they are going for their date.
11. ↑ The whole Imperial Palace area
12. ↑ Augmented Reality
13. ↑ Short for French 'Mini Mitrailieuse', mini machine gun, maybe the FN Minimi
14. ↑ Before any gun maniacs complain, I found out from the web that the Ultima Ratio is the anti-personnel baby brother of Hecate II. Either the author doesn't know the difference or it's a combo of both guns.

You should just ignore the Ultima Ratio part, but I have to put it in since it's in the raw.

15. ↑ 6 mats $\approx$ 9 ft $\times$ 12 ft
16. ↑ Japanese 911, police and emergency number
17. ↑ firearm configuration in which the action is located behind the trigger group
18. ↑ Japanese driver is on the right side.
19. ↑ Japanese post offices also has banking functions
20. ↑ Legendary sniper of Finland who racked up the most confirmed number of kills. 505 sniper kills, and well, you can read the rest here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simo_H%C3%A4yh%C3%A4

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